

著者紹介

柳内たくみ(やないたくみ)

東京都在住。自衛官を経験した後、2006年に自営業を開業。本業に従事する傍ら、インターネット上で精力的に執筆活動を展開し、2010年4月、「ゲート 自衛隊 彼の地にて、斯く戦えり 1. 接触編」で出版デビュー。シリーズ累計60万部のベストセラーとなる。他に「氷風のクルッカ 雪の妖精と白い死神」(アルファポリス)、「戦国スナイパー」シリーズ(講談社BOX)などがある。

イラスト：黒獅子(くろじし)

2月2日生。熊本県出身、東京都在住のイラストレーター。職を転々とし、2012年2月よりフリーランスとして活動開始。インドア派で趣味はゲームと映画鑑賞。最近では海外ドラマにハマりつつある。

<http://www4.pf-x.net/~kurojishi/>



ゲート

自衛隊 彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

2.

炎龍編

〈下〉

✧ 柳内たくみ

アルファポリス文庫



9784434177033



1920193006001

ISBN978-4-434-17703-3

C0193 ¥600E

定価：本体600円＋税

発行 アルファポリス

<http://www.alphapolis.co.jp/>

発売 星雲社

伊丹ら陸上自衛隊が駐留するアルヌスの丘周辺は、「特地」と日本を繋ぐ拠点として栄え、双方の絆は着実に深まっていた。そこに突如現れたダークエルフのヤオ。彼女は一族の仇である炎龍を滅ぼすため、心の病んだテュカを悪戯に刺激し、伊丹に炎龍討伐をけしかける。混乱状態に陥ったテュカを救うため、ついに決断する伊丹。炎龍との命がけの戦いが始まった！超人氣の自衛隊×異世界ファンタジー、文庫化第二弾・後編！

アルファポリス文庫



ゲート 自衛隊 彼の地にて、斯く戦えり 1. 接触編(上・下) 柳内たくみ

ゲート 自衛隊 彼の地にて、斯く戦えり 2. 炎龍編(上・下) 柳内たくみ

レイン(1～6・外伝) 吉野 匠

虹色ほたる 永遠の夏休み(上・下) 川口雅幸

からくり夢時計 DREAM∞CLOCKS(上・下) 川口雅幸

!・!!・!!! 二宮敦人

暗黒学校(上・下) 二宮敦人

THE QUIZ 梶本孝思

蛟堂報復録(1～6) 鈴木麻純

寝る前に読んでください。 佐藤光浩

寝る前に読んでください。Vol.2 佐藤光浩

ちよつといい話 佐藤光浩

Illustration: 黒獅子
柳内たくみ
Yanai Takumi



自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

ゲート

2. 炎龍編 下

奥歯を噛みしめ、舌を前へと出した。

「teruymmun! hapuriy!」

を前へと出

[illegible]

それは雷撃の召喚であつた。

へきがん
碧眼から流れる涙を
まき散らしながら、
こんしん
渾身の雷撃をテユカは召喚した。



ゲート

自衛隊 彼の地にて、斯く戦えり

2. 炎龍編〈下〉

柳内たくみ Takumi Yanai



アルファポリス文庫

Chapter 9

“Piña!”

“Diabo-nii-sama... what’s the matter?”

Piña stopped in her tracks when she saw her panicked elder brother.

At long last, they had finished that waste of time of a meeting. After that, the Senators were going to discuss the future course they would take. As Piña turned around and halted, her movements went against the flow of the moving politicians and created a frustrating blockage in one of the Senate Building’s hallways.

What had once been a ceiling was now a patch of open sky, and the stars were visible in the sky.

The sudden stoppage made the Senators collide with each other, and the impacts sprayed sparks from the torches they were holding all over the young and old Senators. Then, they gave Piña dirty looks and walked past her.

Diabo, who found Piña among the crowd of Senators, led her into a small room to avoid prying ears. This was one of the less damaged rooms in the Senate Building; it still had three walls standing. This was enough for privacy.

“Do you know about Zorzal?”

“Mm. Father decided to make Ani-sama his heir. I can breathe a sigh of relief since he had decided on the official succession. So, what’s happened now?”

“I don’t know what that idiot is thinking, but he wants to compete with Father. I don’t even dare say whose side I’m on.”

Diabo narrated what had happened in Zorzal’s room.

However, Piña needed some time to digest it.

“...Well, isn’t Ani-sama always like that? Maybe being named the heir went to his head. Something cunning like that sounds wrong for him.”

“I agree... what’s this all about, anyway?”

“Could it be I’ve made a mistake? Since Ani-sama is going to be Emperor one day, it’s only natural that Father would want to supervise him. Why compete with him? What’s he trying to do?”

“Right now, he just seems to be watching and waiting.”

“Which means he won’t keep watching forever?”

Diabo looked like he was about to spit out a grain of sand in his mouth.

“There are two kinds of idiots in this world. Some idiots know they’re stupid. The other idiots just think they’re smart. That fellow sounds like the latter case.”

“Father is now planning to advise Zorzal, and when he dies, he hopes Diabo-nii will take over for him so the Empire can carry on... at least, that’s what I think?”

“He wants me to be that moron’s counsel? Nobody told me anything like that. Why the hell do I have to advise him!? Shit, Father gave up too soon!”

Filled with anger, Diabo punched the broken wall. The fragile paint layer shattered under the impact and turned into dust which drifted away.

“Ani-sama. In most cases, the eldest son has the most convincing claim to the throne. The people won’t care about his personality or talents (or lack thereof), only that he’s the eldest son. The same thing applies with the army. If we disrupt this natural order and try to determine the succession of the Emperor with pure ability, there may be other ambitious people who think “I can do it too” and make their bid. If that happens, the country will be plunged into chaos.

Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. This is why Father will worry about his decision right up until the end. However, the country is now in danger. If Father selected you as Emperor, Zorzal would oppose you, and the country would be in even greater danger. With that in mind, it was the most sensible decision to let Zorzal take the throne.

Diabo-nii-sama, not many people like Zorzal-nii-sama, but there are many in the courts who support you.”

Piña’s calm and logical words cleared Diabo’s head. She had grown while he wasn’t looking. Her words were very persuasive.

When Diabo compared himself to his elder brother, he felt that he would be better at administration. Thus, he had worked tirelessly to make himself the next Emperor, but he had forgotten that his uncle, little sister and little brother were also his rivals for the throne.

What would his little sister do when she realized this?

Zorzal did not treat his sister as a rival, because he believed that one’s enemies would not try to get close to you. Therefore, Diabo had to think about how to make use of her connections and influence. At this point, Diabo looked at the flip side of things; that if the enemy army worked with Piña, she would be a frightening foe. He needed to make use of her as soon as possible.

As he thought about it, a chill ran down his spine.

Diabo suddenly realized that Piña was the closest to the throne.

A common tactic the Empire used was to help a noble who was most aligned with the Empire’s interests become king of his country, then signing a formal alliance with the country which now had the Empire’s interests in mind. The country of Japan possessed overwhelming military power, and it was in a good position to make use of it. His father, the Emperor could not possibly have overlooked that.

With that in mind, Diabo tried to see the situation from the Emperor’s point of view. Emphasis on “tried”.

He had too little information to work with, but after adding Piña into the equation, and considering that Zorzal would become the Crown Prince, he could see the outlines of the future taking shape.

“Japan is too soft as an enemy. As long as you do not fight them head-on...”

As Diabo recalled the Emperor’s words, he realised that it implied the Japanese were easily manipulated. They loved their people, they were friends of justice, and they were overly trusting. How did one make use of enemies like that? No, how could one make allies of them?

In other words, all one needed to do was change the current antagonistic relationship between the Empire and Japan.

But how to do it? The key person for that plan was... Piña.

He needed to create a situation where Piña would end up opposing the Crown Prince.

The best way to do this was to have Zorzal wage war on the Japanese. Zorzal would play the role of warmonger. For that to happen, they needed a military advantage, however temporary, and then the initial victories and misconception of the situation would lead to confusion. That would require a set of skills that were completely different from politics...

If he could put this plan into practice, he could have Japan ally with Piña for the just cause of ending the war. Japan's military power would eliminate Zorzal and Piña would take the throne.

In this way, Japan, who was their enemy up till now, would become Piña's ally, or in other words, an ally of the Empire. After that, Japan would help support the Empire's authority, and they could absorb Japanese culture and knowledge faster than the other countries. In a sense, Zorzal would be a sacrifice for this future, while he could stay in a safe place.

As for Piña, she could not overlook her father even if she became Empress. In addition, she had nobody skilled in national administration on her side. All she could do was use the people Father gave her... which meant there was a chance he could call the shots from behind the throne.

“Umu~”

After thinking about the matter calmly, he decided to abandon Zorzal's plan of “the retired Emperor versus the current Emperor Zorzal”. Instead, it would be more practical to turn Japan, which was one of Pina's hidden cards, into an ally.

Although Zorzal wanted to compete with his father, the fact was that his imagination was far behind his father's. More importantly, he lacked the power to make his will become reality.

Diabo felt like he had suddenly woken up from his older brother's lies.

If this went on, it would be dangerous to be Zorzal's ally. And even if Zorzal became the Emperor and Diabo became his ally, his life would be uncertain too... In the end, all he could do was become an advisor to Piña, his father's puppet.

Since Diabo was eyeing the throne, he began considering how he could put himself in Piña's place. In other words, he had to catch up in his relationship with Japan. In that particular field, he had fallen far behind.

Diabo continued thinking.

Once again, he tried to think as the Emperor did.

He added Piña and Japan into the simple plan of the Emperor opposing Zorzal, and then thought about how to make himself the fulcrum on which all their relationships would turn.

That being the case, what Diabo could do was become a fourth faction. Then, when the time was right, he could throw out a casting vote to make himself the next successor.

The question now was who he could ally with.

Perhaps he could ally with the Empire's vassal nations. Naturally, since he was going to join the battle for the throne, he would certainly want power that could fight against the Imperial Army. If there were no forces like this, what if he looked through the Gate, within Japan, or at countries beyond Japan? There should be a faction that was powerful enough out there, right?

“...? Nii-sama, are you thinking too much again?”

Anyone would find it strange if someone else stood in thought for so long.

“Although I understand that Zorzal-nii-sama’s thoughtlessness is troubling, Diabo-nii-sama is also overthinking the matter.

As he realised Piña was looking at him, Diabo concealed his schemes, and replied that Piña was the one who was confused.

“Who was it, anyway? Who was the one who put that big idiot Zorzal up there?”

“Well, if you’re calling him an idiot... actually, don’t you think Zorzal-nii-sama might actually have the ability to succeed, but he was just hiding it until now?”

“Impossible! He’s an idiot. Just consider the following. If he was afraid of Father, then he should have hidden his talents until Father passed away. But he exposed them at a time like this; doesn’t that make him an idiot?”

“Well, nii-sama, don’t you think that’s a bit much? Perhaps he was simply overjoyed about becoming the Crown Prince, so he couldn’t control himself for a moment.”

“In any case, he’s a real idiot! That can’t be helped! And if he is really as much of an idiot as we think, who knows what foolish things he’d do!

The fact was that while pretending to be an idiot and doing foolish things, Zorzal ended up believing that he was a true genius when in reality he was in fact a big idiot!!

Listen, Piña. That big idiot is very scary. The worst part of that is his petty intelligence!! There are a lot of idiotic merchants who are penny wise, pound foolish. Who knows, they might just be a hair separated from geniuses. The problem is that big idiots drag down everyone around them.

It’s no longer just his problem. It also involves you, Piña. You’d best think of what to do after this.”

Those last words might well have been a warning to Piña that said, “The Empire will revolve around you in the future. The people behind you (including Diabo himself) will be watching to see how you move the Empire.”

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about that for a long time.”

“You, you have? Well, as expected, there’s no way you couldn’t be thinking about that.”

As expected, she had the throne in her sights. His sister was truly one to watch. However, the battle was not decided until the very end. Diabo clenched his fists, and resolved himself not to lose. And then, Piña’s answer was not quite what Diabo expected.

“I want to be a protector of fine art!”

The way she replied was as though she did not realise her situation at all.

Tyuule took off the leather collar around her neck, before throwing it away in disgust. Then, she collapsed face-down on her simple bed, in her cramped, personal room.

She covered her face, which was covered in bruises and bite marks, with both her hands. She pressed at them with her fingers, but she knew the marks were still there. Even though she knew they would not vanish when pressed, she still could not help herself.

“.....”

She sighed softly. After that, a muffled, hoarse voice came from below her bed.

“Tyuule-sama. This is Bouro.”

Still face down on her bed, Tyuule replied as though she were sleep talking.

“What is it?”

“This is the report we received from your subordinate at Arnus.”

“Is that so. Put it aside. I will read it later.”

She was grateful for her subordinates’ loyalty, but right now, she was just too tired. Even the closest relative felt like a stranger at this time.

Bouro had no other duties besides delivering the report, so Tyuule expected him to leave. However, Tyuule’s loyal servant remained where she was.

“Tyuule-sama. Since Zorzal is now the Crown Prince, the Empire’s end is only a matter of time.”

Tyuule scoffed in her heart, and quietly muttered about why he had not left yet. She almost began to order him away. However, Bouro was her only minion. Without Bouro, Tyuule would truly become Zorzal’s caged bird. Therefore she could not reject him too harshly.

What this ugly male wanted was a reward. And indeed, loyalty deserved a fitting reward. However... Tyuule was sick of it. First Zorzal. And now this man.

Tyuule grabbed her head, turned over so she was lying on her back, and then she let one leg dangle to the ground.

Before long, a liquid, dripping sound rose up from below her, accompanied by the sensation of a tongue licking at her feet. Tyuule grit her teeth against the unpleasant feeling, and spoke calmly.

“Getting that bastard fired up has been a real chore.”

You are a great man, yet other people underestimate you despite your great talent. This is why geniuses cannot be understood by those below them. Let them say what they want. At least, I understand you.

You are strong and righteous. Of course your magnificent gestures will invite jealousy from others. You are, no, only you are truly correct.

You are perfect. Your methods are too revolutionary, so the plebeians cannot understand them.

A genius does not need to do as a plebeian does. Do as you please. Yours is the right way.

The Emperor fears you, so it is not that he didn’t name you Crown Prince, but he could not. The Emperor is a fearsome man who killed your sworn brother. Being feared by such a fearsome person proves that you’re a perfect being. In order not to be assassinated like your sworn brother, you need to lie in wait. Hide your talent. Conceal your ability. Pretend to be a useless man. Now, you can only play the role of a useless person.

Tyuule whispered these honey-coated words into Zorzal's ears in between her sweet moans, and that was how she snared Zorzal's soul.

He believed those pleasant lies, and with those as a base he believed even more lies, and then he lied to himself because he believed those sweet lies. At this stage, he no longer suspected her. His ego and confidence expanded with no basis for it, and he even claimed other people's ideas as his own. Or rather, he treated it as other people stealing his ideas.

"The spineless warriors from the other world are not worth fearing," she whispered, and when the Emperor-to-be heard them what he thought was, "How did you come to know my thoughts?"

"However, I must not be careless. I need to find a way to sabotage the peace talks. No matter what, I have to make the war continue. I must fuel the fires of war. Let all the humans in this land hate, curse, massacre, plunder and destroy each other, until the Empire falls. Let the Empire burn, let the streets burn, let the villages burn, let the humans vanish from the face of the earth. They will not receive a single scrap of mercy. Only then will my revenge be complete."

"Then, I have a good idea. Kill off the Nihon slave. They destroyed the Senate Building after finding out a couple of their people were enslaved. If they knew the rest were killed, they would go out of their minds with wrath."

"They attacked just because one or two of their people were made slaves..."

As Tyuule heard those words, the nameless irritation in her breast became anger.

When she had been enslaved herself, nobody came to help her.

Nobody saved her. Nobody sympathized with her.

Nobody thought about her.

And then, she heard that those of her people who survived actually believed the lies that she betrayed her race, and swore vengeance on her.

She could never forgive that.

She had sacrificed herself for her home. But nobody thought to repay her for that. Nobody loved her for it, and simply put, she would never forgive them for their foolishness. And now her anger would spill over onto Noriko, who was in the same situation as herself.

"Naive. Far too naive. I can't do it myself. I need to implicate a member of the royal family. The best choice would be Piña. But if that's not possible, Diabo is fine too. Noriko needs to be killed somehow. Then the war will continue. It will continue forever. The war will draw in everyone around it. The humans will kill each other, and their corpses will cover the earth. Zorzal and the Empire who killed my father, my mother, my brother and my tribe will be destroyed. Everything will be destroyed. And then I will be pleased. And then, Bouro, I will grant your wish..."

The ugly man licking Tyuule's calf had a face which looked like a cross between a pig and a dog. His eyes gleamed as his ugly features twisted into a smile.

"Leave it to me, Tyuule-sama. I will rack my brains for you. As such, please do not forget our arrangement. Eeheeheehee..."

This was a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of foreign affairs from America, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, China and Japan. Kanou Taro was there, but his earpiece boiled in his ear, causing pain.

He pulled out the earpiece, which was streaming translated words, and tried several times to cool his ears. However, his body was the sort to heat up easily, and since the words exchanged by the diplomats excited him, his temperature went up again. He had to quell it by sheer force of will.

Kanou sighed, and spoke to Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, whose name was Vladimir.

"We cannot accept a request like that. Ginza is situated in the heart of our economic district in Tokyo. We cannot accept an unconditional stationing of foreign armed forces there. Not to mention, our country has no reason to trust Russia. After all, was the invasion of South Ossetia in Georgia not a recent occurrence?"

It took some time for the translators to render Kanou's words in Russian. Kanou took the opportunity to take a drink from a bottle of mineral water on his desk. Vladimir's face changed colors as he heard Kanou's words, and he began speaking forcefully at Kanou. However, Kanou did not speak Russian, so he waited with a blank expression while the translators did their jobs.

The translated message was:

"We will not tolerate your malicious slander of our nation. My country's actions in South Ossetia were taken to protect our people. The ones who should be censured are the Georgians, who wanted to perform ethnic cleansing. My country's military actions were justified and are above criticism!"

Kanou shrugged and said, "I was kidding," and the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs turned to look at him. The Vice-Minister would not show his skill here... in other words, he would be handling the secret negotiations behind people's backs (in other words, under-the-table negotiations). After receiving the approval of the American, UK and German representatives, he scribbled it down on a notepad and showed it to Kanou.

The notepad read: "Broad agreement. Details TBD."

"Well, all I saw was Russian soldiers pointing their guns at members of the press..."

As the translators did their job, they somehow managed to convey Kanou's tone in a very aggressive manner.

Vladimir pounded his table and rose, his ear tips red.

"These are lies from the Western media!"

"Live telecasts are hard to fake. I believe the new "evidence" supplied by the Russian government *post facto* are the fakes. In any case, our country cannot trust yours. Therefore, Japan rejects the Russian request."

The Russian foreign minister glared at the representatives of the other countries, clenching his fist.

This G8 summit was convened to discuss economic and political problems. Naturally, the Gate which appeared in Tokyo, Japan, was one of those topics.

The incident happened in Japan, so it should be Japan's problem. And the managing the Gate should also be Japan's responsibility.

However, once they learned about the vast resources hidden beyond the Gate, they ignored the drawbacks the Gate brought with it — in other words, war — and focused entirely on its benefits.

Each country was basically saying the same thing, “Don’t hog everything, share some with us.” In addition to the G8 countries, there were other countries who were interested in the Gate, like Korea, India, Taiwan, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, Singapore, among others.

Prime Minister Morita caved under the pressure from all these countries, and decided to make a big concession.

Of course, Japan could not just roll out the red carpet for them. They had to take care of their own interests as well. One could not just tramp into someone else’s house with muddy shoes. They had to say what had to be said, and refuse what had to be refused.

That was the main demand Kanou and Natsume made during the Cabinet meeting. The Cabinet went with it in the end, but they added their own restrictions onto the plan before approving it.

And so, the usage of the Gate and the amount of intervention Japan would accept on its soil would be decided by the eight nations here.

Now, it was the Japanese Foreign Minister’s turn to speak.

“Our country is deeply concerned about the threats levelled at Japan by the Special Region’s, that is to say, the Imperial Army. Please believe that we act with the defense and security of Tokyo in mind. What we desire is to enter the Special Region, observe the Japanese army, and to provide the minimum military presence needed to protect our country’s interests. A refusal at this point will only invite suspicion regarding your reticence to divulge your activities. Please keep that in mind.”

Kanou remembered that the Korean Embassy had said something similar.

“Please be at ease. Ever since Japan was defeated in the Second World War, we have become a democratic country. We would never commit atrocities like the military suppression and subsequent massacres of the Uighurs and Tibetans. In fact, our country has invited residents of the Special Region to share their opinions before the National Diet, and to provide proof of the JSDF’s righteous action. If you still have doubts and insist on visiting the Special Region in person, that is not an impossible request, although we will need to stipulate certain conditions up front.”

These were the main points of the terms dictated to the Foreign Ministers of the various countries:

“To begin with, because the Gate is in Tokyo, any travel to the Special Region must pass through Tokyo. However, no country would permit foreign militaries to move through their economic centers. We hope you will acknowledge that fact.

In addition, while passing through Japanese territory, the personnel of the various nations must obey our country’s laws. Our country heavily regulates the possession of weaponry, and the possession of firearms, blades and other weapons are strictly forbidden.

In accordance to our country’s regulations regarding explosives, explosives and ingredients that could be used to make explosives are forbidden from being taken to the Special Region. If there is a need to transport such items, it will be done so in accordance to our country’s methods. In addition, please obey our traffic laws.

Violations will be punished in accordance to our country’s laws. In addition, to enforce these conditions, visitors will be subjected to luggage searches. Refusal of these searches will also be subject to punishment.

In the unlikely event that armed foreign military personnel are found in Ginza for any reason, they will be viewed as offenders in accordance with our country’s laws and will be immediately fired on by JSDF troops. Any offending vehicles will be destroyed. In addition, we will request compensation from the home countries of the offending soldiers, to the tune of one million US dollars per offender. If any buildings or

other assets of our country are damaged in the process, we will request a suitable amount of compensation for them as well.

In addition, these monies will be paid to our nation in the form of a deposit. Therefore, a deposit will be required to send troops to the Special Region, and the amount will vary according to the number of personnel sent. If there are ten people, the deposit will be ten million US dollars, and if there are 100 people, the deposit will be 100 million dollars.”

At this point, the faces of the ministers from the various countries were stern masks.

Only the American foreign minister was smiling. The TMCSUSJ¹ permitted American soldiers to bear arms on Japanese soil, so the above conditions were largely irrelevant to them. As for the deposit money, there was no need for the US to worry about getting it back, given the relationship between the US and Japan. In addition, the sum was a pittance compared to the potentially vast benefits they could gain from the Gate.

The UK and German ministers remained impassive, but they were scribbling notes to each other in some form of discussion.

In truth, these two countries had long given up on gaining any territory and benefits from the Gate. Much like the US, they realised the difficulty of sending and supporting a large army through the tiny conduit of the Gate. Therefore, they decided to provide support for Japan in exchange for other considerations.

If that were the case, they would not need much firepower or intelligence personnel to keep an eye on the Japanese. The deposit they would need to pay would be correspondingly minimal.

The Canadians and Italians seemed to be consulting with their ambassadors. They might be communicating with their countries. Under-the-table dealings were also taking place, as each of them stated their case and listened to others before reaching a decision they were all willing to abide by.

The problem now was France, with its large overseas colonies, the militant Russia which might well launch an invasion, as well as China, which ruthlessly claimed territory and suppressed minorities. These three countries shook their heads bitterly at Japan.

Much like they had done a century ago, these countries were planning to devote a large amount of fighting power to secure colony rights.

France still had a lot to think about regarding the problem of resupply, but since China and Russia were closer to Japan, their supply chains were short and since they naturally prioritized their militaries, they did not have to worry too much about the unique nature of Japan’s roads.

In addition, China wanted to solve their overpopulation problem by exporting their people to the Special Region.

Once they moved their people over there, they could take control of the region with military forces under the pretext of protecting their people. However, Japan would certainly demand a ruinously huge deposit to move their people over, so China would not agree.

“My country will not take actions which affect the economy or politics of Japan. Therefore, we feel this excessive deposit is unnecessary. In addition, we feel the summary execution of armed personnel is too barbaric. Please reconsider your terms.”

Kanou replied to the French foreign minister.

“I refuse.”

¹ Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan

Although he did not understand what Kanou was saying, fireworks seemed to be going off behind the Frenchman's eyes.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Please allow us to politely refuse. The large deposit is intended to deter excessive movement of military strength to the Special Region. This is because our country does not wish to destabilize the Special Region. In particular, we are currently undergoing negotiations with the armed forces of the Special Region. If chaos were to break out during this time, the situation might devolve into an armed conflict. Or does France intend to cause havoc in our political and economic districts and take advantage of the confusion to launch an attack?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Do you swear that the French troops who are to be sent beyond the Gate will not cause problems in Ginza?"

"Of course."

Then, Kanou replied, confident the problem had been solved.

"Since the French personnel will not enter Ginza bearing arms, then there is no need to worry about summary executions, because there is no way they will commit any offences which require those executions. Am I correct? Or are there plans to commit offences once they are in place?"

As Kanou said these words, the day's deliberations ended.

Elsewhere, heedless to the opinion of the world and what went on behind the scenes, Itami was fumbling around blindly in Arnus town.

He had a bad feeling about this.

It was a very bad feeling.

The blonde Elf Yanagida mentioned could only have been Tuka. Nobody else fit that description in this place.

Itami did not dislike Tuka. No, in truth, she was the type he liked... all right, he liked her a lot.

She was beautiful, and she did not need makeup to be attractive. Her face was pretty, her hair was a honey-golden hue, her skin was soft and silky, her limbs were slender, and so on. She made people want to dress her up like a moving doll.

Her cornflower-blue eyes possessed a mysterious charm that Itami could not resist.

If she had troubles, it would only make him want to talk to her even more. However, Itami felt there was an insurmountable wall between them, so he did not do so.

That wall was like a giant piece of unexploded ordnance in her mind.

"Go check on the blonde elf girl."

He recalled Yanagida's annoying face, and his words.

He thought of Tuka and that piece of unexploded ordnance that might go off at any time.

Itami had treated her gently until now in order not to let that piece of ordnance explode

If anything happened, if she lost the balance in her heart, what would happen to her?

No, that was wrong.

He knew what would happen to her. That was why he tried to deny it. He turned his eyes away from it because he did not want to see it.

After Yanagida left, Itami and co. headed for the residential district of Arnus town, which was when he started his fumbling around.

He had to check on Tuka. However, if the situation had become one that he most feared, he suddenly did not want to go near her. As he wavered back and forth, it took him 25 minutes to reach his destination. He must have looked like a stalker.

Anyone would be suspicious of the way he got so close to a girl's room. However, everyone in the ALC, from the children to the elderly, knew Itami. So when they saw him doing something strange, they instead greeted him quietly.

"Itami-ojisan, good evening... what happened?"

He was a boy who was about two to three years younger than Lelei.

He was holding a box full of washed Wyvern scales. Itami knew why he was working so late.

The ALC had grown quite large, and the people they employed had increased. Yet, the residents of Coda Village did not stop working. Perhaps they were not sure of their position, but they did not think of hiring people to work for them.

As more and more people came to the ALC, as well as new members... well, it was a complicated feeling for them. Of course, they needed people to help them, but they all felt that they had to set a good example by doing the work first. Therefore, it was difficult for the workers to goof off while the boss was not looking. Or rather, if they slacked off while the kids were trying their hardest to earn money, they would be failures as adults.

In addition, they had simple natures. They were very respectful of specialists who could do things they could not, like the mercenaries, traders, engineers, and other professions which needed specialized knowledge. They would go "And so, when you do this, that solves it." "Whoa, you're awesome, oji-san!" or something like that. At this point, anyone who did not want to work was probably being stubborn.

Who knew, this might be why this place was called "Heaven" or "The best workplace". That being the case, the important administrative tasks were handled by Lelei, Tuka, Rory and Kato, so nobody could try and exploit them through loopholes. And they also had the JSDF for security.

In the past, a dishonest man tried to cheat people, but in the face of the JSDF MPs' terrifying mental calculation techniques (in the Special Region, most people who could do mental calculations were doing more important jobs), his scheme fell apart and he was drenched in cold sweat.

Incidentally, while this man was being transferred to a job where he would not have contact with money, he attempted violence against a Dark Elf woman, which resulted in him being fired and sent to Italica for trial.

Because of this, the male Harpy who was working with the boy panicked and said, "Ah, young master, let me carry this back for you," and then he carried the box of scales back to the warehouse. The boy, his hands

now empty, ran over to Itami and asked the same question from just now: “What’s wrong?” with a mischievous look on his face.

“Nothing’s wrong. It’s just... something.”

"By something you mean... a night raid?"

Now, this was a precocious kid. Still, if he was two years young than Lelei, he would be 13. It was not too surprising to hear these words from a boy on the edge of growing up. What would a normal adult do now? Scold him? Or let him off?

Itami was curious about where he had learned those words from. Then he replied, “Well, no,” to the boy. After that, he continued in a more serious tone, “You can think that, but don’t say it. If weird rumors go around, it’ll be bad for the girl you’re talking about.”

“Then again, you mean you won’t do anything? Her Holiness’ room is at the back, while Lelei-neesan’s room is opposite... or are you going to pounce on Tuka-san? Are you?”

“Oi oi, if I touch Lelei, it’ll be a crime. Japan has child welfare laws and teenage legislation or something like that. And for the record, I *am* looking for Tuka, but not to do naughty things.”

He had not mentioned Rory, but she would have cleared the minimum age requirement. Still, the kid seemed to be implying that Lelei was Itami's even though he had a reason not to touch her. It was a surprise, but he felt that he had to protest that.

And then, the boy deliberately tilted his head.

“.....Could it be that oji-san doesn't know about the three-night rule?”

“What’s that?”

“.....Ah, it’s impossible, I’m done with this guy.”

As Itami watched the boy walk away with a hmph, Itami wondered, *what are you mad about?* Then he put him out of mind. Still, his brief chat with the kid helped him gather his resolve to head to Tuka's room, because he did not want to keep thinking about it.

He knocked on Tuka's door.

Before he heard a reply, as he stood in front of the temporary housing, he imagined a scene he did not want to see at all.

What he saw was his mother from the past. Her gray face was crowned in wild hair, and she was banging her forehead against the wall over and over again, like a restless spirit. A chill ran down his spine as he saw it.

"Still alive" "Yes. Still alive" "Still alive" "Because nothing happened" "Because the murder never
happened" "That's right, never happened" "But, not here" "Not here" "Then where" "I have to find him"
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The first two sentences are identical to those found above.

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He shook his head to clear away the horrible images from his mind.

It was not cold outside, yet his hairs were standing on end.

After a while, the door opened from the inside.

“Yo, Tu...”

He planned to greet Tuka, but the one who greeted him was Lelei. Inside the lit room, he could see Rory, wearing her black Goth outfit.

“Come in...”

The expressionless Lelei spoke in a way that suggested she was afraid of being heard. Itami took the hint and swiftly entered.

After he came in, he slid the bolt home after closing the door.

And then, three people looked at Itami.

One of them was Rory. She seemed tense, but after seeing Itami, she relaxed a little.

Another was Lelei. Her expressionless face looked somewhat uneasy.

The last one was Tuka.

She sat on a wooden bed, and her hair was wild and mussed up, like she was afraid of something. She looked frightened and fragile, but when she saw Itami she broke into a smile. With tears streaming from her eyes, she stood up to hug Itami.



Then, still hugging Itami, she turned to Lelei and Rory.

“See, I told you. He came back.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Rory looked hurt, while Lelei’s gaze swept past Tuka and rested on Itami once more.

Itami was confused because he did not know what was going on. All he could do was ask, “What happened? What’s going on?” But Tuka beat him to it.

“Really, you two, there’s got to be a limit to jokes. I’ll get mad if you go too far. And then... that lying Dark Elf! Afterwards I need to fix her good! I’ll throw her out of town!”

The arms hugging Itami tightened a little. She sounded really angry, and so Itami nervously asked:

“Ah, about that, Tuka... what exactly happened?”

“It’s like this. Those two, they said Father was dead. Funny, right?”

“Father... died?”

Itami turned his pleading eyes from Tuka to Rory and Lelei. However, Rory turned away, like she had been stabbed, while Lelei simply met Itami’s gaze and watched his movements.

“Yup. But it wasn’t their fault. The Dark Elf’s the one to blame.”

“And the Dark Elf is...?”

“Don’t you know? She’s famous in town. She came to beg for the help of the Men in Green to save her tribe and her home. But after she was rejected by the JSDF... well, I felt sorry for her, and I gave her a place to sleep, but she turned out to be an ungrateful person. I don’t know what she was thinking, but she suddenly said Father was killed by the Flame Dragon. She wanted me to admit it, and she said after I admitted it I should ask the Men in Green to take revenge. How rude.

“...Take revenge?”

“That’s right. No matter how badly you need help, you shouldn’t lie.”

“Lies?”

“Yeah, about Father being dead and all. Eaten by a Flame Dragon, how stupid is that? He’s alive and well, aren’t you, Father?”

Tuka looked at Itami with her blue-green eyes and called Itami “Father”.

She was smiling when she looked at Itami, but her eyes were not seeing him. They were filled with madness. And that awoke the memories that were sealed in the back of Itami’s mind.

In that instant, Itami’s stomach lurched.

Everything he had eaten and drunk while Yanagida was treating rushed up from his stomach.

He couldn't hold it down even with his hands. Moving fast, he threw open the door to Tuka's room and vomited on the spot. He threw up everything he could until his stomach was empty, like someone had tied a rope around it. After that he threw up his bile, but he still could not stop his heaving.

"What on earth is going on?!"

Tuka wailed, and went to pat Itami on the back with a worried look on her face. Itami waved her hand away, but his gut still hurt, enough that he could not move.

"Dammit! What the hell is this!?"

Itami, still stained with vomit, slowly stood up.

Son of a bitch, someone broke Tuka!

Behind him, Lelei was chanting a spell with her solo chorus voice.

After that, Itami's consciousness vanished into darkness

The first thing he saw when he woke up was the ceiling of the temporary housing.

From the window, it looked to be well into the night. But the lamplight illuminated the room, and this mix of light and darkness seemed to be all that was left of the world.

"So you woke up at last?"

Rory smiled to him from where she was sitting at the head of the bed. Behind Rory was Tuka, who was breathing slowly.

Itami realised that he must be lying on Tuka's father's bed. Tuka kept changing the bedsheets and blankets even though nobody used it.

"Lelei put Youji to sleep. And then, Tuka was pretty worried... she said 'Father's going to die'."

Lelei was standing beside Rory. Her left cheek was red and her lip was split.

"What happened?"

Rory replied on behalf of Lelei, who was unable to speak. "There were some problems getting Tuka to sleep."

Still lying down, Itami sighed deeply.

Fortunately, his vomiting spell from earlier was over. His stomach still hurt from the way he had emptied it.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"How do you want me to tell it?"

Rory looked at Lelei, to indicate that she could speak for herself. Lelei acknowledged the look and stepped forward.

From Lelei's explanation, it all started when Lelei brought the Dark Elf called Yao over, and gave her a room.

“Yao?”

“Wasn’t that the woman who called me a brat?”

Itami recalled that time when he had been drinking with Rory, and the Dark Elf who pointed her side sword at him.

“Ahhh, *her*, is it?”

She had come to beg the Men in Green to save her village from the Flame Dragon which attacked it. However, the JSDF rejected her request.

“I heard that much from Yanagida. But why did she tell Tuka her father was dead.”

“Let me explain that part.”

A Dark Elf woman appeared at the door. How long had she been there?

She undid the turban that hid her face. She had a look on her face that went beyond fearlessness and headed straight into wickedness.

Rory clicked her tongue and reached for her halberd, while Lelei brought her staff close to her. The two of them were radiating hostility.

“It’s a little late for greetings, but... oh Man in Green, my name is Yao. I am a Dark Elf from the Ducy tribe in the Schwarz Forest. I am the daughter of Dehan, Yao Ha Ducy.”

After that, Yao bowed deeply.

“I already know your name.”

“I see. I apologize for that time. I mistook Rory-dono for a young girl, and I thought a wicked man was trying to take advantage of a child. Please forgive me.

“Then, why did you say all that rubbish to Tuka?”

Itami sat up on the bed from his supine position, looking straight at Yao.

“That was an accident. I was only telling the truth.”

“Then, let me ask you. Why did you tell her the truth?”

“Is that not obvious? Because of malice.”

Malice?

Yao snorted as she saw Itami’s surprised expression.

“Yes, malice. What other reason could there be? ...I heard about the three of you from Mr. Yanagida. They say that the three of you will break all the rules to save people. Which means, I had no choice apart from doing this.

I already went to your comrades. I pressed my head to the ground and begged them. I told them that if they could help me, I would do anything I possibly could for them. Any request, any demand would be fine... but every single one of them refused me. Right now, my people are suffering and praying for someone to come

with the strength to defeat the Flame Dragon. But all of your comrades laughed and said, “If it’s Itami, he might have a way.”

Itami looked to Lelei, and she quietly said, “I translated for her.”

“That was why I broke her. If you want to save this Elf’s heart, you have no choice but to tell her that her father was killed by the Flame Dragon, and then finish it off. Well then, Man in Green. What will you do? Will you leave that Elf as she is? Or will you take up arms and fight?”

Itami’s teeth ground against each other.

They made a creaking sound as he gritted his teeth in anger, and he glared coldly at Yao.

Yao’s expression was a complicated mix of anger, sorrow and mockery, and there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

She took a step forward, to Itami. And then she spoke.

“When a person’s loved ones are killed, that person will definitely want revenge on the killer. If the culprit is a natural disaster, then all that person can do is curse the gods.”

Yao’s eyes flickered toward Rory for a moment.

“But what of the Flame Dragon? The killer is there, but there is nothing that can be done about it. Nobody can catch it to punish it. Yet it is not a disaster sent from the heavens. Then... then where should this anger be directed? Who can this wrath be vented on? Where can the hatred for the loss of one’s kin be pointed?”

Yao stepped forward again.

“Revenge is a rite that restores one’s spirit after it has been ravaged by the anger and hatred of loss. That is the only way to heal one’s soul and stand up again to face reality. That is the only way we can have a tomorrow.”

Then, Yao got to her knees and pressed her head to the floor in front of Itami.

“I beg you. Even if it’s just for this girl’s sake, please save my people. I beg you.”

Yao went on to say that she would offer her body as payment. She would do anything he told her too. She would not even complain if he ordered her to tear herself apart.

Yao poured all her strength into those words.

Chapter 10

From the looks of things, Yao and Yanagida's plan was a complete failure. All she could do was grit her teeth in anger. On his part, Itami had already accepted the broken Tuka.

“Papa♪”

Itami went along with that sad fantasy of hers.

After treating him as her father, she seemed to have pulled back from the brink of madness, and he had responded appropriately to her.

Of course, this was just sidestepping the problem. Or rather, it was running away from it.

It was not impossible that they might receive a withdrawal order tomorrow. When that time came, he obviously could not bring Tuka back with him. All he could do was leave her here, and that would be as good as killing her.

Still...

What can I do? What can I say? Itami grit his teeth and tried to hold back the tears, and instead forced his face into a smile before turning around.

“What’s wrong, Tuka?”

Tuka was humming cheerfully as she made breakfast.

After the two of them finished their meal, Itami said he had work to do, so he would be returning to the “team”. On her part, Tuka had work to do for the ALC, so she headed to the nearby forest.

When evening came, Tuka waited for Itami to return after preparing dinner. This fake and peaceful life went on for ten days.

“What are you doing today?”

“Oh, just JSDF stuff.”

“You must be really busy...”

“Well, this town’s grown quite big, so we have to do the work the JSDF assigns us. Isn’t that the same for all of us?”

“Well, that’s true...”

“Also, I’ll be going to the Capital tomorrow. You need to take care of the house.”

“The Capital? Why is that, Father?”

“It seems they need someone to translate and lead the way. 3rd Recon will be there too, so there’s no need to worry.”

Itami was Tuka’s caretaker, but he was still a JSDF serviceman at heart. He had no right to refuse any orders given to him. Therefore, he needed to lie as appropriate.

“Father, can’t you not go? I’d like you to stay at home...”

“Don’t be like that. I’ve gone out for several days quite a few times in the past.”

Suddenly, Tuka’s brows furrowed, and she winced as a headache came over her.

No matter how much Tuka tried to treat Itami like her father, they were ultimately different people. There were small differences in their speech and habits.

In addition, Itami knew nothing about Tuka’s father, Hodoryu Ray Marceau. If he had some idea what he was like, he could at least improve his act, but without any information on her father, Itami could not help but conflict with Tuka’s mental impression of him.

These conflicts were where the fantasy broke down. Tuka would retreat from them to protect herself. Then, she would ignore those conflicts. She would not think, would not see, would not hear and would not understand them.

The stress from doing this manifested as painful headaches which swept over Tuka.

Living, eating and spending time together with Tuka was slowly increasing the deviations from her idealized image of her father. When the conflicts with reality increased until Tuka could not bear them, it racked her with headaches and other signs of bodily discomfort. And as the days went by, the frequency of these attacks and the pain that accompanied each one increased.

Itami looked at Tuka’s pretty face, now twisted in agony, and muttered quietly, “What should I do?”

He could not do anything. It was taking all his effort just to maintain the present situation. As Itami thought about this, he left Tuka’s room, but just as he stepped onto the street, he saw Yao, who had been waiting for him.

“What, you again? Haven’t you gone yet?”

“...”

Itami felt a twinge of guilt as she glared at him with her hateful eyes, and he averted his gaze. Then, he angrily jerked his head aside and stalked past Yao, ignoring her.

In most hero stories, a beautiful maiden would tearfully beg the hero for help, and the hero would set forth with sword in hand. Itami hated those stories.

That was because battle was a thing which was won by living and which was lost by dying.

Because stories were stories, the warrior would win, earn his reward and gain a lover. But in reality, the opposite happened. Most of the time, the warrior’s corpse would litter the countryside.

What would the beautiful maiden do if that happened?

The whole thing sounded like someone was looking for an idiot who was willing to throw his life away for meager compensation paid after the fact. Then, if he succeeded, they would paint him as a hero.

In these stories, the warrior’s life was cheap.

Itami did not want to die. Although his way of living up to now was not very good, he did not think his life was worthless enough that he would discard it at another’s whim.

He had been married (although it had ended in a divorce), but he felt that he had gotten to know more women. He was looking forward to what would happen with them.

However...

“She can’t stay like this forever. The end will come soon.”

Yao’s words were like a curse.

Itami stopped, and shouted behind him.

“Son of a bitch!!”

“Yo, Itami. So, how long are you planning to play house?”

Yanagida’s voice came from behind Itami, as he was seated in front of his PC. He was mocking him about Tuka.

“Do I need to tell you? You should know.”

“Ah, forget it. As long as you’re fine with it, so am I. More importantly, the first batch of prisoners we’re repatriating are coming through from Japan. The PM’s aide is going with them too. They’re going to begin the talks soon, using the prisoners as collateral.

“What about the kidnapped people?”

“They’ll arrange for some sort of prisoner exchange. This round of returns is also meant to send a message to Piña, that we’ll treat our captives well. They we’ll say, ‘Whether the rest of the prisoners are returned depends on your attitude. Their treatment might worsen depending on how things go.’ Then the Empire will have no choice but to say, ‘We’ll work as fast as we can’ or something similar.”

“Is that so...?”

“Is that so... Isn’t that a little dull for you? Totally unlike the guy who slugged the Crown Prince of the Empire in the face and had him beaten into a pulp.”

“Sorry, I’m kind of distracted now.”

Itami sighed, and took his hands away from the keyboard.

He was not making any progress. Instead he was talking with Yanagida about meaningless things. For some reason, he also felt worried.

He had never liked talking to Yanagida in the first place, and now that feeling intensified.

“Are you alright?”

“Frankly speaking, no. Recently, my brain’s been all messed up,” Itami said as he closed his laptop and grabbed his head.

“Then the solution is simple, right? Kill the Dragon and all your problems will be over.”

“If I do that, most of the people who go with me will die. I can’t do that. I like Tuka, but I like my guys as well. I can’t sacrifice any of them.

Did you know? Sergeant Major Kuwabara's daughter is going to get married. He was telling me how much he wanted to play with his grandson after he retired.

Nishina complains about how his newly-married wife dominates him with her job, but secretly, I think he kind of likes it.

Kuribayashi also needs to go on dates with the guys I introduced to her. She's quite picky too, I think she said something about 'None of the men are my type'.

Kurokawa is still an idealist as always, but she's gotten better after the incident with Tuka. She's doing quite well.

Tomita is dating Bozes, who came for the language classes. There are even rumors that they're breaking the regulations by trysting at night. If they get caught, he's going to be punished.

Kurata is totally devoted to that House Formal maid called Persia. He works extra hard whenever he's picked for missions in Italica.

Katsumoto is concerned about the kids in the ALC.

Tozu's financial skills are getting better and better. He's always shown an abnormal understanding of stocks, and he's been praised for his work with the ALC's finances.

Azuma's about to finish his training for assignment to a combat unit. After he finishes his course, he'll be a Sergeant.

Sasagawa takes part in photography contests. He takes them seriously, too.

Furuta never stops honing his culinary skills, and he's always been thinking about how to make new dishes with the ingredients from this side of the Gate.

Well, as you can see, they're all a bunch of interesting fellows. Although it would be different if it were a proper mission, if I had the choice, I wouldn't want to take them anywhere dangerous."

Yanagida pulled over a nearby chair and sat down on it.

"I'm just telling you that this matter involves diamonds and oil. They're an immense boon to a resource-starved nation like ours. In any case, think of the country's interests. If the place where the Dark Elves live has resources like that, we need to get them in our debt. Afterwards, extracting those resources will be easy."

"Then, Yanagida-san, why don't you go yourself?"

Itami was saying that Yanagida was also a JSDF man. He had to go out and get his hands dirty instead of plastering his ass to a chair all day long.

Yanagida simply shrugged, seemingly unconcerned.

"Unfortunately, I have no men under me. Or do you mean you'll lend me your people, Itami?"

"As if. You can go by yourself."

"Me, by myself? No way..."

"Yanagida-san. The only thing that humans can freely use are their own lives. If you think diamonds and oil are worth betting your life for, then use yourself as the stake. After all, the prize is a diamond the size of a human head and a Dark Elf beauty too."

“Well, if a person could handle it alone, I’d like to do it too. However, that’s a Dragon. What can I do against it?”

Itami narrowed his eyes and said, “Well, LAMs work against the Dragon... if you can hit it.”

Even a tank would have trouble taking on a Dragon in an open field. However, in a place with dense cover and lots of ground clutter like a forest, a single person might be able to do it.

Well, that was assuming the Dragon was equal to an attack helicopter.

In the end, fighting it was still a problem. Then, what if he imagined his opponent as a flying tank? It would be fine to fight it in a cramped space where it could not turn around easily. Lure the Dragon into terrain like that, and then take it down with a LAM. It could work.

“Well, your opponent is a living creature. You could poison its food, ambush it while it’s sleeping, and so on...”

“.....I could. It might even work.”

Surprised, Yanagida looked at Itami, who was lost in thought and not very responsive. He stood up abruptly to abort the topic.

“Well, Itami, just let me know when you’re ready to go. I’ll take care of the paperwork for you.”

Itami did not turn to look at Yanagida.

“.....Ah, I’ll be counting on you, then.”

That night, Itami brought Tuka to the canteen so she could drink with everyone.

Usually, Elves did not mix with people because they were haughty by nature. However Itami was worried that people might misunderstand if people on the streets saw them together. At the same time, this meant Itami could stop playing the role of a father. It gave Itami time to think.

The townsfolk and 3rd Recon gathered around Tuka, and Kurokawa sat beside her to help.

Tuka felt Kurokawa had a professional look around her. As a result, Tuka had an expression that said, “Could it be that she has a thing for me...”

Though it probably was not to that extent, one could say that she had feelings of admiration.

And so, Kurokawa sat beside Tuka, and Tuka told Itami, “Father, come sit with me”. Itami, on the other hand, was sitting at another table and drinking with Lelei and Rory.

“How does it feel to have a daughter older than you,” Rory smirked. Itami smiled bitterly at her.

“It’s complicated. Very complicated.”

It would not be long before the game was up. Itami’s words also carried a hint of wanting to stop this charade. Lelei and Rory knew this, which was why they did not answer him.

Itami and Tuka were running towards a cliff edge. But if they stopped halfway, Tuka would break down. Therefore, Itami could not quit.

Itami was fully aware that the two of them would wait until he made a decision. That being the case, there was no need to ruin the mood like this. This was supposed to be a happy occasion.

“Hi, sorry for the wait.”

The Catgirl seemed a little wobbly as she brought the food over. She must be new here.

“What happened to Delilah?”

“Senpai received a letter from her hometown, so she’s taking a break.”

“I see...”

Rory raised her glass and toasted Itami from the opposite side of the table. Seated beside Itami, Lelei raised her glass of a non-alcoholic drink from Japan and toasted him as well.

The two of them had a radiant air about them.

Women like this were very rare, be they lovers or just friends. Women who did not know much would disregard the situation and selfishly adopt an annoying or annoyed attitude.

With that in mind, Rory and Lelei were excellent girls. He had to treasure them.

After realising that, Itami began thinking about what he could do, and what he should do.

Itami’s mother had fallen ill when he was still in middle school.

In order to stop her husband, who was getting more and more violent, she reached for a knife from the kitchen.

It was self-defense. It could not be helped.

The police, lawyers, detectives and people from a women’s counselling facility came by to comfort her. However, his mother could not stop hating herself.

She kept on castigating herself, even though there was nothing to be done about it.

It tore at her, the pain of losing her beloved husband, her anger and hatred for the “person” that killed her beloved husband, and the unease for her child’s future.

The path his mother chose to save her soul was to deny reality. That was the only thing she could do. Itami now knew how she had managed to carry on living somehow.

But at that time, Itami did not understand why she had done it.

Be it right or wrong, it was important to maintain one’s balance. After all, saving everyone in the world was impossible. However, the young Itami did not understand that logic.

Every morning, every night, he saw a place set for his father. It made him worried, then angry, and then—

“Dad’s dead. You killed him.”

If only he had not said that.

Many times, he imagined himself going back to that moment, like one of those light novels where people could travel back in time. He had also dreamed of himself at that time. He had wished, begged and prayed to be allowed to go back to the past. If only he could have returned to that time, he would have done something differently. He could have, he should have. He kept thinking about it. However, reality could not be rewound. That was why it was reality.

If he could go mad like his mother, that would be fine too. But he could not.

And so, Itami saw his mother slowly breaking down. If one threw a frog into boiling water, it would immediately jump out. But if one put it in cold water and slowly heated it up, it would stay in there. In this way, her madness grew and grew, and it was hard to tell when she would explode. Then, as time passed, she broke in front of Itami's eyes. His mother set herself on fire.

In the end, she was forcibly hospitalized, because there was a fear that she would endanger herself or other people.

Her hospitalization was mandated by the law. Therefore, it was done without her consent or that of her relatives. When the burden of paying for her hospital fees was too great, it would be taken over by the government.

All Itami the high-schooler could do was watch as his mother shouted, "I don't want to be here, I want to be discharged!" But it was too much for him to live with his broken mother. Therefore, the word "mandated" was a relief for him. He no longer had to feel guilty about her hospitalization.

"It's compulsory, so it can't be helped. It's the law, after all."

The heavy, metallic sound of the iron gate closing still echoed in Itami's ears until this day.

Yes, this was not an ordinary hospital.

One could see the patients chatting with each other along the hospital corridors.

Because they were not physically ill, their bodies were healthy, and most of them wore normal clothes. They did nothing but stay in the hospital while time passed.

They had breakfast, talked, had lunch, and then they waited for dinner.

And then, by the time they realised it, ten or maybe twenty years, had passed. No, for some of them, thirty years had passed in reality. However, their mental ages were still stuck at their 20th or 30th birthdays, when they had been institutionalized. After all, they had not had the chance to gather the life experience people of their ages should have had. It was hard enough just trying to withstand the pain their illnesses brought them.

Mental hospitals back then were wards that looked like large Japanese rooms, where people lay down on the floor and slept in rows. Calling a room like this a ward felt very wrong. However, that was what it was. It was only recently that regular hospitals began giving each individual patient their own beds.

As one walked along the highway, one could see uncles and aunties smoking like punks, using an empty tomato juice can as an ashtray.

These were the more stable patients. Sometimes, one could see the more severe cases.

For example, the ones who talked to thin air.

There were people who would keep climbing up to high places, and teenagers who would shout angrily at public phones.

There were women who were drugged with powerful medication and wandered around the halls, with goofy, sedated expressions on their faces.

There were men with stethoscopes who did examinations on the nurses.

There were girls who ran around naked.

There was a man who was tied to his bed, wearing a diaper, and screaming until his throat was about to break.

There was a unique stench in the hospital air, and it was not just cigarette smoke. In order to prevent suicides, the bathroom doors were low and made with a large gap from the floor, so people could see if anyone was inside.

In the end, Itami abandoned his mother in a world like this. It was all he could do.

When Tuka intimately grabbed Kurokawa's arm as she smiled and laughed with the soldiers around her and with the PX girls, there was no sign at all that she was going mad. But if Itami left her alone like this, she might well end up like his mother. No, she would definitely end up that way.

And regretfully, modern psychiatry had not yet found a cure for that.

All it could do was prescribe drugs to alleviate the symptoms. Incurable people could not be cured. The only thing that could be done was to feed them medication and wait for them to get better.

Itami had taken over ten years to understand that. Therefore, he felt that if he was going to save Tuka, he would have to do it now.

On that day in the past, he could not do anything.

Back then, he was merely a child.

Then, what about himself now?

Was he still incapable of doing anything?

Perhaps if Tuka took down the Flame Dragon that killed her father, it might help ease her madness. Perhaps if she accepted her father's death and avenged him, it might stop her hatred.

However, this was a risky gamble, and it was the most disastrous kind.

To begin with, he could not wager anyone else's lives on this.

Itami had only one chip he could bet, the one that belonged to him alone. He took that chip and placed it on top of Tuka's, and then slid them both onto the green gambling table.

However—

“Is that all I can do?”

Although he had already accepted that he had no other choice, fighting a Flame Dragon was still a terrifying prospect.

It was close to midnight, and Itami was seated on one of the benches in front of the doors to the treatment center.

The night breeze blew. Itami grabbed his head and muttered, “What should I do...?”

Four or five minutes later, he heard a metallic, clacking sound approaching him. A silhouette loomed out of the darkness and stood in front of him.

“Young man, could I sit down here?”

The silhouette was an old man. No, he might be younger than that. However, the numberless wrinkles covering his face made him look like an older man. The reason why he made a metallic noise when he walked was because his left leg was a prosthetic, and he was speaking in the language of the Special Region, not Japan.

Overawed by the old man’s presence, Itami immediately scooted over to make some room.

Besides, there were other benches here. There was no need to give him a hard time if he wanted to sit there.

“Hoooh~ you actually did it. I come here every night. Keep that in mind.”

The old man did not seem used to his prosthetics, and sat down after much effort.

“Then, young one. What are you worrying about, and at such an hour?”

“It probably doesn’t have anything to do with you, Gramps.”

“Is that so. Then, forget it. If you don’t want to talk, it’s fine.”

The man breathed in deeply. He seemed quite taken by the noises his artificial left arm made when he moved it.

“I still don’t understand how such exquisite objects are made. In your world, do all the people with missing arms and legs get by with these?”

Although Itami was quite annoyed by the man trying to strike up conversation, he could not embarrass the JSDF by being rude, so he had to entertain him. “Mm. Well, not everyone is like that, but for the most part, people have these.”

“The doctor said I could walk normally after I was fitted with these, but it still seems fishy to me.”

“There are people with artificial limbs who can run faster than normal people.”

The man was shocked, and he pressed Itami for details. According to Itami, the people in the Paralympics could set records with their artificial limbs which normal people would be hard-pressed to beat.

“I see, I see. Well, it looks like you can speak when it comes to a topic you’re interested in. Fine, we’ll leave it at that. Tell me; what’s been bothering you to the point that you’re up this late?”

“Hah?”

“A man shouldn’t be waffling around. It’s disgraceful.”

Itami wondered how he had started talking to the old man without realizing it. After sorting his thoughts out, he realized that he did have something to discuss with him.

However, the person he was looking for was this treatment center's psychiatric social worker.

That social worker did not look much like a man. Rather, he seemed rather androgynous. His hair was short and he wore round glasses. Although his white clothes let people know he was medical personnel, he did not have a doctor's air of authority. Instead, people might mistake him for a weak student, or perhaps it would be better to say he had a gentle aura about him.

"Well, if it isn't Lieutenant Itami. What are you doing here at this hour?"

"Actually, I had something I wanted to consult the doctor about..."

This social worker was here for Noriko's sake. He was in charge of counselling her and helping her recover.

Itami was quite surprised to know that the person supporting Noriko was a man.

Most people who had gone through what Noriko had would be afraid of men. And in truth, in many cases, female trauma victims would be better handled with a female psychologist. However, for Noriko's case, the doctor decided that a male psychologist would be better.

Otherwise, she might never be able to trust men, and her unease around men might spiral into a phobia of men. If that point was not addressed, she might not be able to have a lover or get married and have children.

Of course, it would be very difficult at first. However, it was important to be able to differentiate between scary men and non-scary men. That step was accomplished quite easily, because Noriko had Itami and the others.

Itami and Tomita represented the non-scary men in her heart. In order to pass on this symbolic position, Itami formally introduced her to the male social worker, and this was how Itami met him.

By the way, this social worker was a strange person who took an infantry NCO course and retired as a Sergeant before going into university. He was permitted through the Gate after being made a provisional serviceman.

Itami sat opposite the social worker and slowly explained everything.

He told a story about a daughter whose father was murdered. Was killing her father's murderer and avenging him the only way to save her?

The social worker shrugged, and replied that all that could be done was to observe the situation and react accordingly.

"Because, someone told me this before."

He spoke up despite it being a personal opinion. The human desire to avenge oneself on an enemy was not related to instinct.

To seize the enemy and punish him. In this day and age, the victims of a crime and their family members would have their feelings cleansed when the police arrested the culprit, handed him to a judge for trial, and he was finally sentenced and the sentence was carried out.

Of course, this did not rule out the noble idea of forgiving a transgressor, but that usually only happened if the victim had some religious or philosophical background which allowed it. In that case, when the victims and their families forgave the perpetrator, their hearts would be cleansed.

"In other words, taking revenge isn't even important at all."

“Indeed. Who knows, it might really be unimportant. However, this “unimportant” matter can give people the strength to move forward. If one does not want to be chained down by unimportant things, then that’s fine too. Draw the curtains on the matter and be done with it. A person’s heart needs closure.”

After Itami heard this, he started to think. Did he have to defeat the Flame Dragon to save Tuka?

By the time he realised it, the old man was sharing his opinion on Tuka’s matter.

“I feel the same as him. Perhaps taking vengeance will ease her heart, If I knew one’s enemies were at large, doing as they pleased, I would be so angry I could not even eat.”

“Still, the enemy is very strong.”

“What, are you afraid?”

“Mmm. Yes, because it’s a Dragon... no, in your words, it would be a Flame Dragon.”

“What did you say! Has the Flame Dragon appeared?”

The old man’s brows furrowed.

Itami looked him over again, and then he realised something. The old man wore an eye patch, and he was covered in wounds. And his face had large scars on it.

“Well, because of the location, we can’t bring a lot of firepower to bear on it. If I engage it with a small group, most of us will become casualties.”

“That’s true. It’s only sensible to throw one’s full force against a strong opponent. There should only be one bastard who sends his fighting strength out in bits and pieces, or ordering his allies to attack an enemy without telling them anything about their foe.”

That last sentence seemed to have struck a chord with him.

“Even if I brought Tuka along, the two of us alone couldn’t win.”

“Ohhh, I see. You don’t want to involve innocent people in this. However, going in with just the two of you is simply suicide.”

“That’s why. I know it’s impossible, and that’s bothering me.”

“Oi, young man. Even if you don’t want to kill yourself, the time will come when you have to do something you don’t want to do. In order to keep it from turning into a suicide, you have to rack your brains and figure something out.”

The old man rose as he spoke.

The metallic sound came from his artificial leg, and his shoulders rocked back and forth as he hobbled forward. Then he placed his hand on Itami’s shoulder.

“Sometimes, you’ll run into a situation which is dangerous, but which you can’t run from. Sometimes, you know you’ll lose, but you have to advance anyway. If you can’t be a smart man, then you should be the stupidest man of all. What do you think?”

The next day, Itami and 3rd Recon were in the Chinook.

As usual, Yanagida was bringing over the things they would send to the Imperial Capital. After making sure his people were seated, he sat down too.

The airman was speaking to Yanagida.

Tuka arrived to send them off. She was standing outside the helipad, with Rory and Lelei.

Itami felt a surge of frustration as he saw Tuka's crying face. But this was only natural. His mission was to lead his people while they were in the Imperial Capital and protect the diplomats. Then he would return, and stay for a little while before his next mission. That was all.

He could only stay for a little while.

After Yanagida was done, he got off the helicopter.

As the rear hatch closed, Itami's chest boiled with frustration.

"Then, we're moving out."

Halfway through the pilot's announcement, Itami suddenly cursed, "Dammit!" and turned to Sergeant Major Kuwabara beside him.

"Sorry, Gramps. I can't go."

However, the noise of the propellers spinning up for take off drowned out Itami's voice.

"What did you say?"

"I'm getting off! I'll leave the rest to you!"



Itami decided to give up his command, and leapt out of the rear hatch just before it closed.

And then, the helicopter slowly flew off.

Itami watched the members of 3rd Recon as they left.

Chapter 11

“What happened?”

As Itami watched the helicopter leave, he turned to Tuka, who was trying to smile through her tears, and said, “I’m not going to the Imperial Capital.”

He took off his gloves, and set aside his heavy helmet.

After that, he felt as though he had been released from something. Well, he would probably regret it later. However, right now, he had decided not to worry about these annoying things. It felt like nothing mattered any more.

“Will that be all right?”

From the way Tuka looked, she must have been worried about making trouble for her father. However, her joy of not having to watch the house alone took precedence, and she slowly walked in front of Itami before lying against his chest.

“Well, the most important thing for me is protecting your smile. I’ll stay with you, so you have to work hard too.”

Itami was feeling pretty good after shrugging off all his responsibilities. Because of that, he could even use an embarrassing line like that in a completely natural way.

“Wh-what?! I-is this what you should be saying to your own daughter?”

Even Tuka’s voice of protest was wavering, thanks to the trembling in her heart.

Itami smiled bitterly and replied, “Does it sound like that?”

In truth, he had not meant it like that at all. All he wanted to do was cheer on Tuka, who had lived a hard life until now.

The problem was that a blockheaded man like him had no idea what kind of effect his words had on women. Would any woman not swoon when she heard that a man she liked wanted to protect her smile and stay by her side?

Tuka leaned her forehead on Itami’s chest and quietly said, “Dummy.”

Sadly, Itami was in his full battle gear, so he could not feel her soft and warm body through his outfit. His bulletproof vest, with metal trauma plates inserted, blocked her body and the feel of her.

In other words, the only thing Itami could do was stroke her head, like he would a cat.

The thin, soft strands of her hair flowed past his fingertips. Then he patted his palm down on her lovely head. When his fingertips grazed the tips of her long ears. Tuka shuddered, then relaxed. Tuka seemed like the very sensitive type, and it must have felt good for her.

After getting his breathing under control, Itami exhaled quietly, and told Tuka to get ready for a journey.

“Let’s go together.”

Tuka had a vague idea of what her father planned to do.

In Itami's 30-plus years of life experience, asking a woman to go on a trip with him was a difficult endeavour. People would reject him, they would feel uneasy about him and look disgustedly at him, and in the end he had to laugh it off by saying it was a joke.

Therefore, when he said it to Tuka in a tone that sounded like her father, it seemed to hit the spot. With a delighted expression on her face, she asked, "Where will we be going?"

She looked pleasantly surprised. Although Itami did not know the man himself, he still tried to imitate a fatherly voice, which was to say, the voice of Tuka's father, Hodoryu. As a man who lacked the authority of a father, he had to force himself to play a father's role. Instead, the tone he produced made Tuka treat a father as a man she could love.

Tuka's innocent smile pierced Itami's conscience. In order to suppress it, he forced himself to smile to her. "We're heading to the south. What, you don't like it?"

"Mm! I'm going, I'm going! I'll go anywhere as long as it's with Father! I'm very happy that we're travelling together!! Will we be leaving right now?"

"I need to make some preparations first. After that, we'll set out immediately."

"Then, finish up quickly. I want to go before noon."

After Tuka finished, she reluctantly peeled herself from Itami's body. She took a few steps in reverse, only turning away when she was out of the reach of his fingertips.

"I'll get ready right away!" Tuka shouted over her shoulder before she ran to her room.

"Itami, are you an idiot? No, I've had that feeling for a while, and it seems I was right."

Yanagida, who was watching from the side lines, was the first to speak after Tuka ran off.

"So you're not just abandoning your mission, but you plan to take on the Flame Dragon by yourself? That's far too reckless. What kind of reason am I going to make up for you to go out all by yourself?"

"Yanagida-san, you can't say that. Didn't you promise me that you'd take care of the paperwork?"

"Even if you say that..."

Yanagida shook his head.

"Well, since the diplomatic visit is over, you probably won't be fired for this, but this isn't going to help your chances with our people. Your punishment from the earlier incident has not been dealt out yet; you might still be suspended, demoted, and transferred somewhere else."

"Argh, I prepared myself for all of that, but it still sucks to hear it being said..."

Itami grabbed his belly and frowned.

He could not take the pain in his stomach any more. Once he was cut loose from the Special Region, if he wasn't thrown to the austere northern garrisons, he would be posted to a distant island. Naturally, he would never be able to see Tuka again, so he had to prepare himself for that.

"Then, I won't say it. Right now, what you need to do is catch up with 3rd Recon, then after you complete your mission, you can take your team to bring down the Flame Dragon. I think I can explain it like that."

“Yanagida-san, you don’t need to go on. I don’t intend to involve them in my personal affairs. I have no time to hesitate. I don’t want to have regrets because I chose to handle this matter later. Therefore, right now, I’ll be moving out.”

“Don’t be like that, you’re being too hot-headed. Don’t you think having more gear will increase your chances of success?”

“I’ll figure something out. Sorry.”

Itami pressed his hands together and faced Yanagida. Then, still in this posture, he turned to the HQ at Arnus Hill and made a praying gesture to Lt. Gen. Hazama. “Sorry for giving you trouble again,” he said before clapping his hands.

“Dammit. Dammit, I’m really pissed off. Is that blonde Elf really worth all this? There are a lot of good women in this world. With your reputation and connections, you could persuade the locals to sell their oil and mineral rights and make a killing in the financial sector. When that happens, the girls will be throwing themselves at you.”

Indeed, that sounded great.

Itami was a healthy, hot-blooded man. He had imagined orgies with girls who were just his type. However, his fantasies were far too unrealistic. For example, how could he find himself being hugged by a horde of half-naked girls?

He shook his head to clear out that mental image. After all, he was not a manga protagonist or anything. He had to face reality coolly and calmly. Yes, he needed to be realistic about planning his future moves. Even if it was difficult, he had to visualize a realistic future.

However, the next thought that came to mind was himself being surrounded by hostesses and gorgeous women who were far removed from his tastes, of going on talk shows after leaving the JSDF, taking part in a signing event for a book called “The Hero of Nijubashi” (and he did not even know who wrote it), or joining a conservative party and running for elections.

His imagination was rather meagre.

However, he could still imagine all the wonderful things Yanagida was describing, to a certain extent. He lacked the ability to create or produce things, nor did he have the ability to imagine a future he would make by sacrificing himself. But he could not abandon Tuka’s future for those reasons. It would be too cruel.

In contrast to that, he imagined himself continuing his life as a serviceman, bringing Tuka, Rory, Lelei, Piña and Bozes to a Comiket, and then making a big disturbance. He liked those happy days better.

“I guess... I can’t do that after all,” Itami said.

Yanagida’s answer was a shrug. Itami could not tell whether it meant “You’re an incurable idiot” or “I don’t get it.” However, even if Yanagida could not accept Itami’s reasons, he would support him until the end.

“That’s how it is, Yanagida-san. I’ll leave the planning and preparations to you. In addition, I’ll need a vehicle, weapons and explosives. Oh, and some spare fuel and provisions.”

Yanagida grabbed his head and looked to the sky while saying, “Hold on, hold on”, then he hurriedly extracted a notebook and pen from a pocket, and wrote down Itami’s requests into a list.

“What weapons will you need? And how much rations will you need?”

“I need at least 10 LAMs, the more the merrier. As for food, since only Tuka and I are going, food for two people should be enough.”

“Oi, is it alright to not bring Yao along?”

“Yao? Who’s that?”

“The main culprit. The Dark Elf woman.”

“Ahhh, her? Who cares about her? Yanagida-san, by that logic, that would make you a second culprit as well, right?”

Yanagida coughed. “Huh, looks like it backfired on me. I’ll do my part, so don’t keep bringing it up, all right? Also, rations for two, right?”

After confirming with Itami, Yanagida looked past Itami’s shoulder and behind him.

“Ah, yes, for two.”

“Will that really be enough?”

“Is something wrong?”

“...”

Yanagida could not speak. His eyes seemed to say, “Don’t regret it” as he looked at Itami. Just then, a mighty force swept Itami’s legs out from under him.

The sight before his eyes suddenly changed to the open sky, and by the time he came to his senses, he was already flat on his back.

Itami was coughing non-stop from the sudden impact, and then suddenly, the sight of Rory in her lace-edged black Goth skirt loomed over him, along with her luscious legs which vanished into the depths of her skirt.

She wore black stockings under her black boots, and then what looked like a black garter belt, but he could not see clearly since it was dark. Further up, all he could see was blackness. As he tried to get them out of his line of sight, he locked eyes with Rory.

“Don’t you think you’re treating us like strangers?”

The halberd’s pointy end slammed into the ground, just beside Itami’s ear.

Beside her, Lelei was watching the supine Itami.

“It’s because, no actually, you see, I felt like I shouldn’t involve you guys.”

Rory sat herself down on Itami’s belly, and she punched Itami’s chest with her tiny fist.

“That’s why I said you’re treating us like strangers. Come on, what’s so bad about involving us?”

“Can I?”

“Don’t say that. It makes me feel lonely.”

Rory kept pounding Itami’s chest.

“But it’ll be very dangerous. We might not come back safely.”

“Well, that sounds like fun. I’m excited now.”

As Rory smiled, Itami could see a demonic, battle-hungry light in her eyes. Itami felt like she was going to devour him in one gulp.

“But, you see, that...”

“You idiot. If you aren’t sincere when you invite a woman to play dangerous games with you, she’ll be waiting forever.”

“But, we’re going to exterminate the Flame Dragon. Do you mean you’re going to die with me?”

“Of course not. A double suicide’s far too lame. Since I’ve got 40 more years in this body of mine, I want to enjoy my time with it before I let go of it.”

“Which means you’re not going?”

“Don’t tell me you were planning to lose from the start. Did you intend to kill yourself?”

Itami shook his head. He felt that even though amidst that suicidal danger, there was a faint glimmer of a chance that he could make it back alive.

“Then, that means you don’t want to kill yourself with me?”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“Then you should be more honest. Oi.”

Rory punched Itami’s belly hard. The blow carried past the protection of his bulletproof vest with its metal inserts.

“Uuu, I got it, I got it, I’ll say it. Hang on a bit.”

Itami sat up to ward off Rory’s second punch, and in the end his face was met by her slim bust.

“Rory, can you come with me?”

The air of danger bled away as Rory smiled. Itami thought, *so she could smile so sweetly...*

“It’ll be expensive, you know.”

“Then I’ll owe you first. Though I don’t know if I can pay you back.”

“That’s fine. I’ll definitely come back. I’ll claim your soul after you die and turn you into a familiar.”

“Are you a demon?!”

Rory ignored Itami’s pitiful face. After a quick glance over Itami’s body, she grabbed his right arm and bit down on it.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!”

Itami wailed like he was having a bite taken out of him, and Rory freed his arm from her maw.

“Contract established.”

There were obvious bite marks on Itami’s right arm. Rory licked the blood that flowed from them.

Then, she wrenched her halberd out of the ground. She held up three fingers to Yanagida and said, “Three people”. Then she headed back to her room, to prepare for the trip.

As he watched Rory leave, he heard Lelei say, “Four people”.

“Oi, oi, Lelei, you’re coming too?”

Lelei gazed dispassionately at Itami and said, “Wasn’t that obvious?” Her tone was cold, like she was talking to an idiot. Then, she continued sternly, “Does the sun not rise in the morning? Do objects not fall to the ground?” as she stared at him.

Did that mean he would not understand if she did not explain it? And then,

“Magic is necessary to increase your chances of survival. I want permission to go...”

Lelei’s eyes seemed to ask, *anything else?*

On the other side of those emotionless eyes, Itami could sense all sorts of emotions hidden within Lelei. And then, he realised that she was very angry.

“L-Lelei-san? Could it be... you’re mad?”

“...”

And so, Itami said, “Four people, please” to Yanagida.

Since he had already agreed to let Rory come along, there was no reason to leave Lelei out. The anger of a girl who did not show her emotions was quite frightening.

Although Itami had thought of refusing her with, “You’re too young” or “You’re an important part of the ALC, Lelei would probably reject them like scolding a baby. Worse, it might add fuel to the fire.

Lelei seemed very happy with Itami’s response as she left. She was probably going to prepare.

And now, Yao appeared in front of Itami.

She had arrived without saying a word, and then she went to one knee in front of Itami. Both her palms were pressed to their opposite shoulders, and she bowed deeply to him.

“No matter what orders you have, my body will forever be yours. I will obey any and every order you make. If you wish me to take my life right now, I shall do so without delay.”

Itami sighed as he heard Yao pledge her loyalty to him. The sheer forcefulness with which she had declared her willingness to commit suicide was very oppressive.

“In any case, if you die here, it’ll be inconvenient for me. Lead the way. I’ll take on the job of destroying that Flame Dragon.”

“I understand. If you wish to confine me, please give the word.”

He could sense Yao's desire to be punished in her words.

Her self-mockery and her desire to be punished must have been some sort of emotional defense from being scolded by others. Yao was keenly aware of her own guilt and Itami's anger.

In this state, even if Itami punished Yao, she could not hate him for it. She could only take it as part of the job.

Perhaps punishing those who wished to be punished would make them happy. If Yao had a conscience, then no matter how severe she was castigated or punished, it would be meaningless.

The thing was, Itami was still very upset. He felt that all this was a pain in the ass. The opposite of love was not anger or hate, but ignorance. When he dealt with her, he would freeze his heart.

If Itami had known more about Yao, he might have felt differently about her. But to Itami, this Dark Elf called Yao was the one who pointed her sword at him for no reason, and she was the main culprit for breaking Tuka.

Yao sensed that Itami was deliberately keeping his distance from her. As a result, guilt and remorse flooded her conscience. "It can't be helped," she thought, and it felt like a special, gentle kind of hell for her.

Being used and discarded for the sins she had committed would only be natural. It was the way her days would end, as one used to misfortune. However, she still wanted to be punished. She wanted to suffer and be scolded. She wanted to be humiliated and degraded.

In the depths of Yao's heart, she knew she wanted to be abused. The thought of that made her shudder with joy.

"So in the end, you'll need enough for five people."

Yanagida, who had seen all of this, said those words like he was spitting grains of sand. For some reason, he seemed very unhappy.

"I say, Itami. Now that we're like this, I might as well come clean. I hate you. I've always hated you, and now I hate you even more."

Just as he was wondering what he was going to say, Yanagida came out swinging with a torrent of abuse. Then he put his fountain pen and his notebook back in his breast pocket, and looked at Yao, kneeling before Itami.

"You know, I graduated from the National Defense Academy, and entered the JSDF with outstanding grades. You could even say I was one of the elite. But you know, nothing this good has ever happened to me before. I worked my ass off to study military matters, the law, and all sorts of other subjects, and I was sincere and earnest to my colleagues and superiors. I bowed my head when I should have bowed it, I kissed all the requisite asses, I made nice with the suits from HQ and even managed to neatly resolve all their messy political and financial problems. I worked damn hard to survive in this competitive world, all the way until now. That's why I can seriously and sincerely say that I hate you. Let me be clear about this. I despise you. A slacker who puts his hobbies first? Don't make me laugh."

As Yanagida continued scolding him, Itami could hear his pride as a member of the elite. However, his earnest tone made Itami want to listen.

"Who the hell do you think you are? You're completely unmotivated, but you made it to my rank on a fluke? If that's the case, what the hell have I been working for? Certainly, the JSDF is a military organization, and rewarding success in actual operations is only natural. But don't you think a fellow like you who does

whatever he wants and mocking my hard work behind my back, is being too cunning? That's why I hope you have a hard time. I hope you keep running into troublesome situations. I hope you meet with danger. I hope you'll have to write letters to your subordinates' parents, telling them "Regretfully, your son met with misfortune in the Special Region and passed away"! That ought to match up with my hard work. Don't you think? Huh?

But now, what's this? Because it's a personal matter, you can't involve your people?

Are you doing that for the nation's benefit? Or are you just saying that to save your own face?

We soldiers can only work with the subordinates that we're given! Our subordinates are what we're assigned based on our rank. That's only natural! Everyone completes the orders they're given so we can be assigned our own subordinates! Am I wrong?

Once we leave the unit, we can't do anything by ourselves. It'd be funny if we could!

But you, why is it that people still follow you?

Why is it that you, and you alone, can find people willing to accompany you?!

Shit, I'm pissed off. God dammit."

Yanagida kicked the ground as he turned away.

Itami watched Yanagida's shoulders tremble for a while, and then he recovered his breath and spoke.

"Well... never mind. How shall I say this... I'm sorry?"

"Shut up, I'm just venting, don't say anything!"

"What, are we bringing this woman too?"

Tuka frowned as she saw Yao, and Itami said, "This woman was supposed to do a lot of things, but now she's given up on them and is heading back to her village. Since it's along the way, we'll be giving her a lift."

Neither Rory nor Lelei said anything about the lie. Yao eagerly went along with Itami's lie by lowering her head and saying, "I'll be in your care for a while."

Tuka was unhappy that what she thought would be a two-person trip had picked up a bunch of fellow travellers along the way. However, Rory and Lelei were close friends, so she was glad that she could travel with them. It was a different kind of joy from just travelling with her father, so her spirits soon recovered.

The people of Arnus Town gathered to send off Tuka, Lelei and Rory, who were packing their things.

Lelei left the running of the ALC to Kato, and she told the children that if they had any problems with finances or management, they should go talk to Kato.

Rory greeted her flock and her drinking buddies, while Yao looked at the JSDF troops and the MPs who had taken care of her.

Just then, the sound of a horn made the wall of people surrounding them give way. After that, Yanagida stopped the HMTV he was driving in front of Itami.

"Yo, Itami. I made you see an embarrassing side of myself just now. Please forget it."

“What’re you talking about? I don’t remember anything like that.”

“That’ll do.”

After Yanagida finished, he shut off the engine and got out of the vehicle. As though taking over from him, Lelei went up into the rear seat, while Rory nervously sat on the HMV. Naturally, the vehicle commander’s seat was Tuka’s.

“I loaded up everything you asked for.”

Itami got into the driver’s seat.

“Everyone, are you ready?” Itami asked the girls on the vehicle.

“All right, let’s go!”

“I’m ready.”

“Anytime is good.”

“I, I’m okay with this.”

Following that, Itami stepped on the gas.

And so, these people set off from Arnus in a HMV.

Arnus Hill Treatment Facility

One could see Arnus Town from the wards. The old man, lying on his bed, watched the vehicle as it left the town.

“So, the young man’s set out.”

His eye which had lost its light was covered with an eyepatch. His left arm and leg were manmade. After dressing himself, he pressed the button to summon the nurse.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Duran?”

The old man shrugged as he heard the nurse’s voice over the intercom.

“Sorry about this, but could you bring over the highest-ranking person here?”

“What happened?”

“No, I just want to say that I’ve been hiding something about myself for a while.”

“Did you have a change of heart? In the past, you just said, ‘I’m just a farmer’ every time we asked you about your past.”

“It’s nothing, I just felt that since the young man already showed his courage, how could an old man like myself cower here?”

“I understand, I’ll get the doctor immediately.”

Arnus Living Community, Worker's Hostel

The dwarf foremen were proud of the houses they built. They were confident that they were not inferior to the JSDF's temporary housing.

Among these houses was the room of the canteen's chief waitress, Delilah.

The floor was made of stone and the bed was made of wood. The first time she had seen it she had gotten a shock, because the place that was supposed to be filled with straw was instead filled with cotton pillows and blankets.

In addition, this place even had furniture like a small desk and cabinets, and a small kitchen too. The windows were hung with colorful curtains. But the most unbelievable thing was that all these were for Delilah's personal use.

When she thought about this place, she was so moved that she wanted to cry.

It was hard to believe that a Warrior Bunny like herself could meet with such good fortune.

Even in House Formal, which was known to treat Demi-humans well, the maids still had to sleep in a big dormitory together, and even the more senior people had to share a two-person room.

And now, she had a room of her own.

The people coming in and out of Arnus Town had increased, and the cramped canteen's tables had also increased. Naturally, Delilah and Dora were short on manpower. As such, their salary went up as well.

After that, Delilah was assigned to train the newbies, and so she became the chief waitress. The new title came with a pay increase and a room of her own.

Delilah was surprised and delighted.

She would open and close the windows for no particular reason, or dust the curtains, and she soaked in the admiration and praise when she showed her colleagues and understudies around her room. The latter would go, "Sempai, it's so awesome!" as they enthused over the room.

There was no need to worry about roommates, and she could walk around naked or sing as she liked. She had never felt so happy and free before.

In addition, she could be proud in the letters she wrote to her friends at home. In order not to burden them with the cost of replying, she enclosed the return postage with her letters as well.

She had sent a recommendation letter to House Formal, hoping that they would be able to recommend her friends for jobs in Arnus.

Delilah desperately hoped that her friends would reply that they could join her here.

In the morning, she woke up a little later than usual to make the bed, and opened the canteen doors when it was close to noon. She would work hard, chat with the customers, then close up around midnight and come home to sleep.

She did not need to worry about where her next meal would come from.

Neither did she need to worry about a place to sleep.

In fact, having too much free time was frustrating.

She lived every day like she was dreaming.

However, the letter she received last night was completely different from her expectations.

“Why, why would Italica send an order like this to me?”

Delilah found it hard to accept the contents of this letter. If she carried out the instructions enclosed within, it would be impossible for her to work in Arnus Town after this. Not just that, it would mean every Demi-human in town would lose their jobs. It was an absolutely unforgivable deed that she was being asked to do.

“Why?!”

Why had House Formal issued an order like this? It was impossible for House Formal, with its ties to the JSDF, to do such a thing. In addition, House Formal was supervising the peace process with Japan, so an order like this was doubly impossible.

However, she had to act as she was directed.

This was because it was a command issued by House Formal’s secret agents. Delilah considered the conflicting order, her current situation, and her own happiness, and all she could do was hold the letter in front of her without moving.

She needed to talk to someone about this. But who could she turn to? Her colleagues? No. Her boss, the head chef? No. It might be best if she looked for Itami and the ALC officers.

Just as she thought this, the sound of the HMV’s engine came from outside her window.

“Ah, Boss Itami!”

But by the time Delilah flung the window open, the vehicle with Itami in it was gone.

Chapter 12

“Oh gods. Oh apostles who hold apart the heavens and the earth. I offer you this prayer. My flesh I offer to become a being of sacrificial flame.

Emroy, God of War.

Hardy, God of the Underworld.

Deldort, God of Covenants.

Palapan, God of Vengeance.”

As Delilah recited her prayer, she faced the small altar on her desk.

She went to one knee, before the candle that represented the gods. The tips of her long rabbit ears were nearly touching the ground.

She was wearing her battle dress.

Her beautiful face was daubed in camouflage makeup, and she held a coal-blackened shortsword.

“Deliver me from fear, from mercy, from love, from confusion. This body shall, with this sword, at this time, claim the life of the foe. May its edge be anointed in the red of fresh blood. I swear upon my soul that my loyalty shall neither change nor be destroyed.”

This was the prayer of the Warrior Bunnies.

Once, the Warrior Bunnies had a small kingdom in the northern plains of the continent.

According to the records, they were cruel and fierce, passionate and lustful. However, those were human records, which were biased against them. Still, the records existed for a reason. Within their domain, the tribes fought each other constantly. After that, they would mate with males from outside their tribes to breed the next generation, and this vivid impression was imprinted in the minds of historians.

In this society, their pure-blooded queen had absolute authority over the tribes, as well as many Warrior Bunny subordinates. There was also a peerage of nobles which existed to support the queen. However, that just represented their position and pedigree, unlike the Empire’s patricians, whose status was passed down through familial lines. This was because Warrior Bunnies had no concept of a family. There were far too few males born to support a proper family line. The Warrior Bunnies were an extremely fertile race, but they produced very few males. Thus, the males were rare, and because they were rare, all the pure-blooded offspring born to the males of a tribe would immediately become backup candidates for the queen.

Because there were so few males in each tribe, the other females would breed with the males of other species to obtain their seed and their offspring. And because they had no concept of husband and wife, they would live with whoever they liked, and leave once they were bored. They did all these things happily. And so, each tribe could function as a family. Delilah herself had been raised by the women of her tribe and grew up under their tutelage.

However, their country had been destroyed by the treachery of their queen.

The Empire attacked them.

It was not a military offensive, but it was more like hunting. Indeed, the Empire's objective was not territory or wealth, but the Warrior Bunnies themselves. They started a war in order to capture the beautiful Warrior Bunnies so they could sell and use them as slaves.

The Warrior Bunnies resisted the Empire bravely, of course. Each of them was far stronger than any individual Imperial soldier. At the beginning of the war, they toyed with the Imperial Army and gave them a hard fight. However, that was all they could do.

The Imperial Army was superior in numbers and equipment, and the Imperial Army had long refined the art of organizing and using military power. The Warrior Bunny tribes all over the Kingdoms were completely overwhelmed by the Imperial counterattacks. Their battle lines were constantly penetrated, until their offensive lost momentum and stalled. Under suppression from all sides, they were finally defeated.

The last of the Warrior Bunnies who could still resist were killed off after they were toyed with. The ones who ran out of strength and surrendered were degraded by the Imperial soldiers and then their ears were cut in half in lieu of a slave brand. After that, they were sold as slaves in the markets, like vegetables.

Of course, not everyone was captured. A few of them managed to escape. However, these escapees had a harder life than the slaves.

They abandoned their homes and scattered to the four winds to evade capture by the Imperial Army. Surviving from day to day took all of their strength. They stole and sold their bodies just to obtain the food they needed to survive. Some of them chose to cut their ears and surrender rather than live such a miserable life.

When they made that decision, nobody stopped them. Their resolve was wavering. Rather than lead a miserable life for a few meager scraps of dignity, they might as well become slaves and have a marginally easier life.

Therefore, those who remained were the strong ones who refused to forsake their honor and dignity, even in the face of death. They were kept going by their resentment of the queen who betrayed them. They survived through hatred and honor.

And then, they met the previous master of House Formal, Colt.

Nobody knew whether it was a hobby or because he was open-minded, but the ones who knew him generally agreed, "It should have been a hobby". That was because he preferred Demihuman beauties to human girls.

In truth, there were several Catgirls and Medusas who had received his affections. However, when asked about the Count, they would all smile happily, but with a hint of bitterness, and say nothing. As such, the truth was shrouded behind mystery.

Later on, when Myui was old enough to inherit the House, she heard from the aged maids about her father's thinking and the foolish things he said. However, Myui could not disclose these words. After all, she had to protect her father's reputation, so she could not casually repeat them.

From this, she could conclude one thing. He had not abused his position and power to take advantage of them. Even though he was fond of Demihumans, he respected their free will and was quite open-minded. It would not be wrong to have a good opinion of him.

In any case, House Formal gathered the Warrior Bunnies, Cat People, Harpies, Medusas, and various other Demihumans facing oppression into its territories and protected them, in addition to forbidding the sale of them. As a result, within the domain of House Formal, Demihumans received basic human rights.

What the Warrior Bunnies received from the Count was a patch of hard land that was difficult to farm. However, this was the only place they could live in peace. They built small houses and eventually a settlement, and called their people over. They treated this place as a second home.

In addition, the Count would sometimes save them from poverty by hiring volunteers as his maids. Because of this, their lives slowly took a turn for the better.

They decided as a group that they would do anything to repay that kindness, no matter the cost.

Therefore, in accordance with the orders from House Formal, she made her final decision.

Delilah stopped thinking and abandoned her doubts. She gripped the shortsword that she had been provided to finish her mission.

Yanagida watched Itami leave, but his face no longer bore an angry expression. After a while, he shrugged and said, “Cheh, I can’t do anything with him”, before switching his mind back to its daily work mode.

The people of Arnus Town returned to their jobs. The PX girls went back to PX, while the head cook and the waitresses returned to the canteen, while the Dwarf foremen went back to their construction sites.

Yanagida headed back to his office, to deal with the extra work Itami had given him.

He reported Itami’s movements to Major Higaki, whose face was twisted in frustration, and then the folder he showed him made the Major even more annoyed.

“In other words, ‘Lieutenant Itami received important information on underground resources from a local resident, and due to its importance and urgency, he handed his command to Sergeant Major Kuwabara and proceeded to the Elbe Kingdom’s borders under the guidance of said local resident.’ Is that right?”

“Indeed. From the beginning, the brass ordered Itami to use his connections to collect information on resources and other things. This action was taken in accordance with this directive.”

“Ah, forget it, since it concerns underground resources like oil and diamonds, we can’t do much about it.”

“Mm. Ever since we started, the Cabinet’s been barking, ‘Find it, find it, haven’t you found it yet?’ All the recon teams here who speak the local language are working around the clock because of the Imperial Capital, so they had no time to do any prospecting or whatnot, despite this being an extremely important objective.”

“It’s fine as an objective, but the problem is its urgency. Is it important enough that we have to divert resources from or abandon our efforts in the Imperial Capital?”

“Yes. The situation around Japan is turning grim. Before long, America, the EU, China, Russia, and various countries from around the world will be setting foot into the Special Region, if we don’t accurately pinpoint the locations of these resources, our country will lose the advantage. This is a vitally important part of our national strategy and we absolutely have to get around to doing it. That’s why I felt Itami’s decision was a correct one.

“Still, isn’t it dangerous to go alone? I’ve also heard that Dragons were sighted there.”

“That fellow’s prepared himself for it.”

“Is that so. Prepared himself for it...”

As Major Higaki said that, he closed his eyes and then reached out to the chop on it.

“All right. We’ll take it as that.”

Yanagida kept the document and saluted Major Higaki before leaving. Just then, Major Higaki suddenly spoke to Yanagida.

“I’ve always been wondering, what exactly is that guy thinking about?”

Yanagida swiveled in a textbook 180 degree turn, and then he answered.

“From the beginning, I thought of him as an idiot. Now, my suspicions are fully confirmed.”

Major Higaki looked outside the window, and then he spoke like he was talking to himself.

“Why then, how can that guy be so stupid?”

Yanagida ignored Higaki’s question.

“The rules and regulations exist to be followed. However, if one blindly follows the rules, someday, humanity as a species will be supplanted by AI-equipped machines.”

“What’s this? Some kind of sci-fi stuff?”

“No. I believe it will be a problem for us in the near future.”

“Is that so. If that’s the case, what is the value of a human life? What is its purpose?”

“The value of humanity lies in their abilities to escape the bounds of rules and regulations. At certain times, the rules and regulations must be broken. When they are broken, we will be able to see the value of humanity.”

Higaki sighed loud enough for Yanagida to hear.

“That girl Yao prostrated herself before me and begged me to save her people. She even hugged my leg. And she was such a beautiful girl. When I heard her cry, my heart ached. At that time, I was confused. But I did not act. I could not act. I have a family to feed, and my subordinates have their own families. I could not take action casually.”

“Major, that’s quite normal.”

“If that guy did what you said and showed the value of humanity... I’d be quite jealous of him.”

After Higaki said that, he turned the back of his spinning chair to Yanagida.

Yanagida continued speaking to his back.

“Major. That’s just because your time has not come yet.”

Yanagida continued his work.

“All right, the next one is...”

After a quick jog, he reached the JGSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force Headquarters — Operation Staff Unit’s 2nd Branch.

The man in charge of the 2nd Branch was Colonel Imazu, who was responsible for intelligence operations in the Special Region.

While most of his subordinates were uniformed soldiers, he was also in charge of a few suits from Intel Branch, as well as men from the Public Security Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the police. In a sense, 2nd Branch was the final destination of people from many other units.

And then, they would be deployed according to their specialties to gather information in the Special Region, perform data analysis and evaluations, or determine the direction of future operations. And Col. Imazu's job was to coordinate everything they did.

"Chief Imazu, I have some documents for you to chop."

Imazu glanced at the request forms Yanagida presented to him. They were *post facto* documents intended to support the legality of Itami's solo operation. Higaki's chop was already on those documents. All Imazu needed to do was chop it himself.

Imazu read each one before chopping them.

"Yanagida. This might concern natural resources, but don't you think it's a bit too hasty? It feels like it's being rushed."

"Currently, the remaining recon teams have all been sent to the Imperial Capital to carry out 2nd Branch's operations. Under these conditions, we do not have the luxury of doing as we please."

"Then think of something. While we can ask scholars like Kato-sensei or Lelei-chan about information, or obtain aerial surveillance from JASDF recon flights, we still need to have boots on the ground to perform investigations. While the talks are important, our job is also very important. I'm counting on you."

In truth, there were very limited number of personnel who could speak the local language and carry out investigations, among other things. In order to ensure there were sufficient people for activities in the Imperial Capital, the resource prospecting mission had been delayed to the point that no progress had been made.

Normally, Yanagida would make adjustments based on each branch's wishes, and in order to allow the operating units to successfully complete their mission, he might have to deny certain requests. However, he simply could not think of a solution for the current situation. Therefore, in the end, he had to adapt to the situation and try to buy himself some reaction time.

"Well, when you think about it, don't you think Itami's actions are a solution for you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think about it. A JSDF officer hires three to four locals, and then travels all over the place doing reconnaissance. Won't that solve the manpower problem? Pick one or two people from each of the six teams, and that way you'll have enough people for six resource prospecting teams. Plus, a recon team should be able to do fine with just one or two people."

Indeed, this line of thought was not a bad one.

Resource prospecting basically meant finding the location of an ore vein. If they met enemies, they could just run away. In that way, one would only need a couple of troops per team.

Granted, it was more dangerous to operate with fewer members, but they could use trusted locals to make up the shortfall in numbers. On paperwork, they would be guides. In other words, just like what Itami was doing.

The main thing was that they needed to ensure the teams could call for reinforcements if something happened. If they could use the SFGp and the West Brigade, it would be a great idea.

“Please consider the idea. There’s no need for you to decide immediately, but I hope you can think about it.”

Yanagida was thinking about the resource prospecting platoons as he left 2nd Branch.

The bugle for the flag-lowering rang out.

The sun was setting in the west. The combat units’ training and other work was over. Each unit returned to their barracks and reported to their commander before working on their weapons in preparation to return them to the armory. After that, they ate, bathed, washed their clothes and polished their boots. After that, they tidied their rooms and their personal equipment, and otherwise passed the time.

Naturally the personnel on evening and night duties were not part of their number. Because they had to patrol the surroundings, they had to draw arms and ammunition from the armory

Yanagida was one of these people whose work was still not done at this late hour.

He still had to show his documents to the most powerful man in the JSDF, explain them to him, and then politely ask him to put his chop on them.

“I see, so Lieutenant Itami learned of possible resources in the Elbe Kingdom, and took several local residents to guide him while he did his prospecting. Is that it?”

In the face of Hazama’s heavy tone, Yanagida straightened his back, and silently nodded.

The stern atmosphere of the General’s office made Yanagida uncomfortable. This was because the leaders of the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 6th Combat Groups, as well as the four pilots from the JASDF were all in the same room as him.

In particular, Col. Kamo (commander of the 1st Combat Group) and Col. Kengun (commander of the 4th Combat Group) were fixing him with sharp looks. It seemed like they were going to jump him at any moment. Yanagida was under so much stress that he could not speak. Their hostility was very clearly directed at him.

What did I do to make them so mad? His nervousness and tension was building up. No matter how elite Yanagida felt he was, right now, he was a mere First Lieutenant.

Yanagida gritted his teeth, and replied to Hazama, “Yes, that is exactly it!”

“What the hell is that fellow thinking?”

“Itami was acting in accordance with our ministry’s Directive 5-304, ‘Special Region Strategic Direction: Resource Investigation’!”

“I know that. I’m not talking about the official reason. Do you know what I mean?”

“I do not know. Whether official or unofficial, Itami moved out to scout for resources!”

Yanagida's camouflage fatigues looked like they had been soaked in water. Perhaps if one squeezed them, they could fill a cup or two with his sweat.

"Is that so. That's it, then."

Hazama glanced at the documents which Yanagida kept peeking at. After he sat back onto this chair, he asked the commanders for their opinions.

"Gentlemen. What do you think?"

Kengun replied, "We will do as the General commands."

"Us too, we're ready to move out at any time."

After Lieutenant Colonel Kamikoda replied, Ltc. Kurihama, Ltc. Nishimoto and Maj. Mizuhara thrust their chests out in support.

"Good. Very good."

Hazama stood up.

"Leaving China aside, ancient China had a lot of people and stories we should respect. For instance, Shen Baoxu. He was a minister of Chu during the Spring and Autumn Period of ancient China. When the country of Chu was on the verge of destruction by the Wu army, he went to the kingdom of Qin to ask them for reinforcements. The Qin king said, 'The destruction of Chu is your problem. Why then, should I sacrifice the soldiers of Qin for you?' After that, Shen Baoxu wept in the courtyard of the Qin palace for seven days while begging for help. The Qin king was moved and sent out his army as reinforcements. What do you think?"

Ltc. Kamikoda of the JASDF replied first.

"I think it was foolish to send the Qin army to die for another nation. Only an idiot would do that."

"Indeed. However, we have an idiot like that in our midst."

Ltc. Kurihama exhaled, and spoke.

"He may be an idiot, but he is still a Japanese citizen. We can't leave him hanging out there."

"Exactly. Gentlemen, do not let that idiot die. Colonel Kamo!"

"Sir!" Kamo stood up ramrod-straight, thrusting his chest forward.

"Order 1st Combat Group to stand to. Then, select appropriate troops to provide reinforcement for Lieutenant Itami's resource investigations. Next, Lieutenant Colonel Kamikoda!"

"Sir!"

"I wish to request air support. Prepare for all emergencies that could happen, for example, an encounter with the Special Region Type A Dangerous Beast."

"Understood!"

The commanders each departed the General's office.

Although he sort of understood what had just happened in front of him, Yanagida was still stiff. Then, he nervously asked a question of Hazama.

“That... I thought we decided not to take action because it would involve us crossing the border of the Elbe Kingdom? Why did you decide to move our forces out?”

Yanagida was operating on the assumption that Itami would be burned to death. If they had been so willing to send out their troops from the beginning, Yao would not have needed to drive Tuka to her wits' end.

Hazama looked at Yanagida.

“Well, it doesn't matter now. Since Itami's started moving, everything is going to turn on him. Yanagida, I believe you speak the language of the Special Region?”

“Mm. I can carry on a simple conversation.”

“Then, I need you to head down to the treatment center. I want you to meet someone. Your mission is to listen to his terms, and then relay ours.”

“I understand. But, who will I be meeting?”

As Hazama heard Yanagida's question, he coughed loudly, and then he took off his sweat-soaked coat before answering him.

“The King of Elbe is currently in our treatment center?”

Yanagida could not hide his surprise at Hazama's words.

To think such an important person was so close by. If this was true, then this incident could lead to relations between the Elbe Kingdom and Japan developing in an advantageous direction.

“That... is that true?”

“Ah, it is. Just now, Bozes-san contacted us. Apparently, she and one of the language students called Suisses-san spoke to him in person. There's no mistake about it. They were also quite shocked when they found out.”

Hazama had arranged for the language students to determine if the King was the real deal. He thought that Imperial nobility ought to know the royalty of the Empire's vassals, and in the end he was right.

And so, Yanagida was headed to the treatment center to visit a certain ward.

What Yanagida saw was a one-eyed man with one hand, taking his dinner on his bed. He had a good appetite for someone who looked like he should have been hospitalized.

“Ohhh, you came. While I was waiting, I wrote a letter to the Prince, who's managing the affairs of state in my place. However, I doubt he'll be happy to hear from me. He probably thinks I'm dead.”

As Duran saw Yanagida, he began explaining the current circumstances, as well as giving the self-introduction he had steadfastly refused to give until just now.

Yanagida seemed to have a good grasp on the situation, so he remained steady. Duran then decided to turn his attention to his food instead of him. He seemed to have wanted to control the flow of the conversation, but he had lost it instead.

Yanagida decided to abandon his tough stance of negotiation. No matter how small his kingdom was, Duran was still the man who led its army. He could not be underestimated. After that, Duran decided to comment on the food he was having.

“I haven’t been too happy because I could not drink, but since the nurses and doctors keep nagging me, I had no choice but to endure it. However, from tonight onwards, I’ll be able to take-out my food from the canteen and have it here. These people of Arnus are eating some really good stuff. It feels like every day is a feast day. That’s the true measure of a people’s happiness.”

His tray was laden with fried meat and vegetables.

Although it wasn’t clear what he had eaten, the canteen in Arnus Town should have sold ordinary set meals. Once the Special Region’s fresh ingredients were flavored with Japan’s spices and seasonings, the result was delicious. However, it was quite hard to imagine that someone who was addressed as “Your Majesty” would be so enthusiastic over such ordinary food.

However, the hospital food must have been awful. He did not know the exact circumstances, but by the looks of things, Duran must have spent a long time in the hospital, eating the same tasteless patients’ meals every day. After that, normal food would have tasted several times better than it really was.

“Well, the town below is also supported by my country, so that’s only natural.”

After praising Japan in this roundabout matter, he asked Duran why the prince left behind in his country would be unhappy that the king was still alive.

“Ahhh, well, that fellow seems to be drifting further and further away from me every day. Life would be much easier for him if I were not around. He didn’t seem happy when he saw my messengers.”

“Is that so...”

Even if a king approved of a military force crossing his borders, it meant nothing unless the people went along with it. It was crucial to let the Elbe Kingdom know that this was not an invasion.

“Give these letters to Duke Cremsan and Duke Watt. They are my close friends, and their locations are marked on that map.”

Duran handed the letters and the hand-drawn map to Yanagida.

“Tell these people to get the useful members of the nobility to help out.”

Yanagida did not accept those items. Instead, he waved both hands in refusal. “How could I? We do not wish to interfere in your family struggles. This has nothing to do with my country.”

“Don’t say that. The Elbe Kingdom was mine to begin with. I simply need some help from you to get it back for me.”

Yanagida frowned at Duran’s request and replied, “It might be best to ask the Empire for help.”

Disappointment crawled over Duran’s face as he said, “I hate the Empire.” From the look of things, he seemed to be nursing a deep resentment against them.

“Well, even if your Majesty provides us your help, how will that benefit my country?”

“Well, I can permit you to cross my borders to slay the Flame Dragon. How about that?”

Yanagida shook his head. Then a wicked expression bloomed on his face.

“I would like to send your head to the prince, packed in salt. With your permission, of course.”

Duran went “Cheh”.

“What an annoying fellow. You want to pack my head in salt? There’s people who’ll bet their lives to exterminate the Flame Dragon, and then there’s you. Which of you comes from Nihon?”

Yanagida replied that they were both Japanese, and two people could not represent all of Japan. All Japanese people had their own personalities, and one could not judge them all by the example of just one individual.

Their menacing dialogue was merely a war of words fought for their countries’ interest.

Normally, this would have been the job of a diplomat, and not an officer like himself. However, right now Yanagida knew that if this dragged on, they might lose benefits which they might have otherwise gained. The fact was that the Japanese government missed out on a lot of chances because they did not seize them in time, and sometimes this even led to losses. However, due to Yanagida’s daily work, or perhaps because of his personality, he was the sort who would use his cunning intellect to extract as many benefits as he could, however low the chances were.

Yanagida understood that this was the difference between himself and Hazama, which was why the latter had sent Yanagida to make sure the negotiations went in a favorable direction.

“Then, what do you want?”

At last, Duran had decided to stop playing the fool, and had decided to get straight to the point in order to hear Yanagida’s requests. Duran acknowledged that he had nothing to bargain with.

Yanagida decided to honestly say what he wanted.

“We want rights to the underground resources in your kingdom. Tax-free, of course.”

“The gold and copper mines are the source of my country’s wealth.”

“Well, I never said you had to give them all to us.”

“But—”

“Then, half each of gold, silver, and copper. Then we’ll take all the valuable resources other than those three.”

“One moment. Do you mean half the present gold mines?”

“Then, half of the newly found gold, silver and copper mines, and everything else apart from them.”

“This is hard to answer...”

“Why is that?”

“Well, first tell me what you want with those things beside gold, silver and copper. It’s sticking in my mind. If there are valuable things besides gold, silver and copper in my country’s soil, then why do I not know of them?”

“Well, even if you wanted to know, why would I tell you?”

Duran replied as he let his tension go. “I don’t want to lose out.”

Yanagida muttered that making him lose was the point, and then he turned to Duran.

“If you don’t know about them, then it’s as good as not having them. Please continue in your ignorance. Unless you mean to say that I should get the salt ready...”

“I got it, I got it. Half of the gold, copper and silver mines, and everything else underground. Is that alright?”

Yanagida rose and offered a hand to Duran while saying, “Please don’t forget the tax exemption.” Without that, the profits from oil and minerals, as well as all forms of trade, would be subject to massive duties and tariffs.

“Cheh, what an irritating fellow. Well, I have no choice.”

“All right then. In exchange, the JSDF will escort Your Majesty back to your kingdom. As for the Dragon extermination, we hope you will be able to help as well.”

“Fine, fine. At this rate, my country will become an ally of Nihon.”

“Let’s do that, then. Sadly, I am only a junior officer, but the diplomats will be returning from the Imperial Capital in a couple of days. At that time, they will discuss the details with you.”

“What’s this? Such an unreliable fellow...”

To Duran, who wanted to remain independent of the Empire, as long as that condition was met, they could gain Japan’s protection.

Duran hmped in dissatisfaction, but Yanagida paid it no heed.

“As long as Your Majesty honors the underground resource agreement, you will be able to maintain good ties between your country and Japan.”

There was a reason why the medical facility at Arnus was called the “treatment center”. In Japan, there were regulations for the naming of medical facilities. Those with less than 19 beds were called “clinics “ or “treatment centers”, while those with over 20 beds were called “hospitals”.

Arnus’ treatment center was designed to accommodate over 100 people. In that sense, it was comparable to general hospitals in the city. However, they were only using 5 beds now. According to the regulations, they should only have enough personnel to meet the standards of a “clinic”. However, if they designated it as a clinic, then in case of an emergency, they would not be able to accommodate more than 20 people. There was no way to predict when a large wave of casualties would arrive in a combat zone, so it was a frustrating problem.

Therefore, in order to get around the limitations of a clinic, they decided to call it a “treatment center” and bluff their way through. However fancy it looked on the outside, it was still laid out like a temporary hospital in a disaster area.

That said, it looked pretty flashy from the outside.

There were benches placed near the entrance to the treatment center, and a girl was seated on one of them.

Her name was Noriko.

The sky was covered in countless stars.

She had come out from her ward in the darkened hospital because she could not smoke there. Instead, she had to go to a designated smoking area. As such, it was quite common to see a lot of patients in pajamas gathered at the entrance to smoke.

This was not meant to be a compliment, but patients in good spirits did not accumulate stress easily. Therefore, as long as it was permissible with their current conditions, the doctors and nurses would give tacit consent and allow their patients to smoke.

However, there were only five people in this treatment center, and only Noriko was a smoker among them. Usually, the old man called Duran, with the artificial arm and leg would be here to talk to her, as though he did not want her to be bored. However, he had not showed up tonight, so Noriko was here smoking alone and in peace.

It was fortunate. Just for tonight, she wanted to be alone.

Today, under the approval of the doctor and the social worker, they had informed her.

That was to say, “We could not contact your parents after the Ginza Incident. We fear they may no longer be in this world.”

“No way...”

“.....”

Naturally, Noriko was immediately suspicious, but the doctor could only shake his head, and then he handed her a mobile phone.

“What’s this, didn’t you say the phone lines were down? Liar.”

As expected, Noriko immediately phoned home. However, the call did not connect. She called her siblings, but the ones who picked up were people she did not know.

“Strange. Is this phone broken?”

After that, she tried to call her university friends.

However, the numbers of her close friends were on her mobile phone, which was long since missing. She could not mentally recall their numbers either, so she could not contact them.

The fortunate thing was, she remembered that one of her acquaintances had a phone number ending in 1111, so she nervously pressed the number pad.

After that, the friend was shocked that Noriko was calling. After rejoicing that Noriko was fine, the friend told Noriko what had happened to her family after her disappearance. Then she promised to spread the news to Noriko’s friends that she was fine, and that none of them could contact her family. Finally, she heard that her house had burned down. It had been abandoned for several months, and it had caught fire because of an overheated electrical appliance.

When subjected to an intense mental shock, people’s minds would engage something like a circuit breaker so they would not feel anything.

Right now, the only things she could feel were how tired and how burned-out she was.

Although it was good that she did not feel sad, she was not completely without sadness.

Right now, she probably looked like a wreck. If this were a TV show or an anime or a manga, she would probably be crying into her pillow until it was all wet. With that in mind, she should probably show an expression on her face that matched her current condition. That would be a sad face, in this case. However, no matter what she did, she could not make that face. All this felt like it had happened to someone else. Because of that, the whole thing suddenly felt very laughable.

No matter what she did, she did not feel anything. If she hit something hard with her hand, it should have hurt, but now her hand felt like it was unassociated with her. There was pain, but it was not her pain. Perhaps she could say she could not feel herself. She felt light and floaty, as though her body could not settle in one place. In the bed, in a chair, watching a tree, punching a wall, hitting her head, none of them worked.

And then, Noriko realized it. "It feels like I'm not myself anymore."

When she thought about it, it made sense. She had no idea what happened to her lover who was kidnapped with her. She thought about him every day, and after her rescue, she found out her entire family was dead, and she did not even have a house any more. It would not be strange if she had changed.

Noriko's mind came to that conclusion.

Right, it's only natural to change. As Noriko thought about it, she decided to try and steady herself down by walking to the treatment center's entrance and having a cigarette.

She spat her cigarette out as she exhaled, and then she thought.

"I might as well just die right now."

To think she had actually said that, and in such a casual tone. She wondered why she would even think of such a thing. She tried to think of the way she would die, so she would shudder, but in the end even that did not happen. Just—

"So, you want to die? That's good," a woman's voice said in a comforting tone.

Fortunately, she had learned the language of the Special Region after being kidnapped in order to survive. That was how Noriko could understand what the voice's owner was trying to say.

"Who's that?"

"Speaking of which, are you called Noriko? It'll be troubling if you're not..."

A Warrior Bunny stood in front of Noriko. She was dressed in a frightening disguise, and the feminine lines of her body radiated a bewitching air.

"Frankly speaking, if you didn't want to die, I wouldn't want to kill you, but since you want to die, yes. I can help you."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"Mm. There's a reason for it."

"I see... I'm going to die..."

Noriko stood before the woman who was cloaked in the shadow of death. Yet, her heart did not falter. There was no fear, no disgust, not even joy. All she could feel was *'ah, so that's how it is.'* Therefore, Noriko looked the woman in the eye. She silently watched what would happen to her body.

The Warrior Bunny drew the soot-black blade at her waist and held it like a billiard cue, aiming it at Noriko's throat.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. It may hurt a little, so please bear with it. It doesn't hurt as much this way."

"Which way do you mean? I don't like pain."

Then, she felt something sharp touching her throat.

"Argh. I don't know how to make it painless. What should I do... well, I could try letting you die as quickly as possible. Would that be all right?"

"How fast is 'as quickly as possible?'"

"Ahhh, what a pain. What should I do?"

The Warrior Bunny seemed quite troubled about this.

"I expected you to resist or run because you did not want to die, and I was prepared to chase you down and kill you, but I never expected you to tell me to do it."

She seemed to be trying to say something, judging from the way she was scratching the back of her ears.

For some reason, this movement reminded Noriko of the other Warrior Bunny she had seen before, and Noriko giggled.

"Heh. For some reason, you look just like Tyuule."

The name Noriko mentioned without thinking made the other woman freeze up.

"You... whose name did you just say?"

The sword pressed against her throat stayed there, without moving, until Noriko looked at the woman in front of her again and asked, "What's wrong?"

Just then—

"You over there, what are you doing?!"

The Warrior Bunny moved on reflex.

Yanagida aimed his 9mm pistol at his target and pulled the trigger three times, without hesitation. However, the Warrior Bunny's nimble movements were far swifter than what Yanagida expected. She somersaulted through the air and avoided Yanagida's bullets, and then she swung her sword down at him.

He evaded the swing by sheer luck.

While following the target jumping around in his field of vision, he lost his balance. The half step he took backward saved his life.

The razor-sharp tip of the sword sliced past his chin and stabbed into the tip of his boot. Yanagida aimed a kick at the crouching Warrior Bunny, who was about as high as his belly. The steel caps on his boots qualified as a lethal weapon. However, the Warrior Bunny back flipped out of the way, and then kept just out of sword range from him.

Yanagida trained his pistol on the Warrior Bunny again, but he could not keep her in his sights. She evaded his aim as though dodging a sword or a spear. Although she could not outrun a bullet once fired, the person holding the gun was a human, and she could move faster than he could take aim. This was a technique that was possible for a master swordsman.

“Cheh—”

Yanagida knew he would not hit, but he fired anyway.

To avoid his gun’s muzzle, the Warrior Bunny went flat on the ground, and then darted forward at Yanagida, aiming her blade at his waist.

Because she was attacking from below him, Yanagida could not react in time.

It was hard enough just trying to twist away, and he felt something burning in his waist.

“There you are!”

The impact made him pull the trigger. But fortunately, his muzzle just happened to be pointing at his opponent’s back. Yanagida did not need to aim, so he kept pulling the trigger, not stopping even after his magazine was empty.

He kept pulling the trigger until he passed out.



Chapter 13

The dark, underground storehouse was lit by candlelight. The air was heavy with dampness, and the ice-cold stone walls sapped body heat. Light and sound were kept outside by thick and sturdy walls. Down here there was only the hellish darkness. In this place, the only thing that might look familiar was —

—a half-rotted chair.

After long years of use, the entire chair creaked. In addition, it had been left where it was for a long time, so there was a thick layer of dust on it.

House Formal's old butler was seated on this chair that was about to fall apart. Sweat dripped off his forehead and he panted heavily. He seemed to be looking into the darkness.

"I, I don't know anything!", he panted.

Several people appeared from the darkness, and one of them dealt the old butler a tight slap.

"Ow!"

The slap echoed off the wall, followed by the butler's cry. The side of his lip split, leaking bright red blood.

"Bartholomew. We already know you sent a fake letter in Lady Myui's name."

The cat-eared glasses-wearing maid Persia grabbed the silent butler by his lapels and lifted him up. Behind her, the head maid watched the pained expression on the old butler's face impassively, before asking another question.

"I, I don't know. It wasn't me. It definitely wasn't me. Please, believe me!"

"Please tell the truth. It isn't too late yet."

After that, the butler was beaten several times, but still, he refused to talk.

"It really wasn't me, I know nothing! Besides, why are you suspecting me? I've worked here longer than everyone else. There should be a lot more people who're more suspicious than me. Anyone could have gotten into the study!"

"But you were the one in charge of the house seal. Am I wrong?"

Seeing the look in the old head maid's eyes, Persia began beating the butler again. She did not strike to kill, just to make him suffer.

However, the old butler stubbornly refused to talk.

"Just let me read his mind!"

Aurea stepped forward. As a Medusa, her hair could absorb the energy of her victims, and at the same time she could probe their thoughts and memories. The problem was that absorbing that much energy from someone would kill them.

However, the old maid stopped her.

“Your mind-reading can’t serve as evidence. We need to make him talk.”

The old maid looked to the corner of the underground storehouse, at the shadowy figure who seemed to be supervising the questioning.

The objective of this interrogation was to show that House Formal and their guarantor Piña were innocent. At the very least, they had to convince everyone present. Although Aurea insisted, “If I read his mind, we’ll know the truth!” they would not be able to convince anyone without evidence.

Mamina, who was standing at the other corner of the room, was trembling with rage. Then, she spoke in a wrathful voice.

“Persia, let’s switch! I’ll do it!”

Mamina the Warrior Bunny stepped in and punched the butler. Delilah was from her tribe, and she was her close friend. She blamed Delilah’s violent actions on the butler and there was no way she could suppress the anger boiling in her.

“Please stop! He is just a suspect. What would happen if you killed him out of anger? People might think we were trying to silence a witness!”

The head maid’s words halted Mamina’s fists.

The old butler and the chair were lying on the floor, and he was moaning in pain.

Mamina clicked her tongue in frustration, then stepped back, her shoulders and ears swaying before she leaned back against the wall.

What Delilah did shook the whole of Arnus Town. Although it was a developing town, everyone knew all about it once the MPs began investigating Delilah’s room in the worker hostel.

After that, everyone began speculating, “Looks like Delilah did something”, and then the Dwarf apprentice in the hospital said, “A Warrior Bunny and Yanagida came into the hospital, covered in blood!” and “Delilah stabbed Yanagida!”. Once they put this information together, it began to spread like wildfire.

Kikuchi, from the MPs came to interview the head chef after the latter contacted him, and the chef said, “Mm, from the start, she was always eager about poking her nose around.”

“Then... will we be chased out of town?”

The chef and the PX girls lowered their heads. They were afraid that what their companion did would affect them as well. However, Kikuchi the MP tilted his head and asked, “Why would we do that? This matter has nothing to do with you. Unless you’re saying you’re involved?”

Those words let the people of Arnus breathe a sigh of relief. It was as though a great weight had been lifted off their shoulders.

However, House Formal could not do that. The MPs found a letter ordering Delilah’s room which ordered her to carry out an assassination. The letter was written in House Formal’s exclusive stationery and stamped with the House’s seal, ordering her to kill a girl named Noriko.

It was utterly ridiculous, but nobody was laughing.

Currently, House Formal was neutral ground between the Empire and Japan. This neutrality allowed it to remain peaceful and prosperous. Therefore, any attempt to sabotage their relationship with Japan would be like dropping a rock on their own feet.

In addition, in the remote possibility that an order like that had to be given, they would never allow anyone to know it, but carry it out directly. In the Special Region, leaving behind written proof of an assassination order was the height of stupidity. However, when she heard the truth, the head maid could not help but think that House Formal was doomed.

There were countless examples of such incidents in the history of both Earth and the Special Region. For example, people leaving behind swords with family crests on them at the scene of an assassination, or letters cursing a country's king, and even suspects with no memory of the crime were used as evidence. In addition, it was also a fact that Delilah was a spy for House Formal. However, they would never have ordered her to kill a Japanese girl. House Formal was adamant on that. After all, they did not even know that there was a girl named Noriko. However, with that in mind, they could not figure out who gave Delilah her false orders.

Ltc. Youga, leader of the 4th Combat Group's 401st Squadron, approached the head maid with a letter in hand. That letter was the same one found in Delilah's room, now a piece of evidence. He asked, "Did you send this letter?" and asked her to "Please uncover the truth." After that, the head maid began investigating everyone in the House.

In the end, the sole suspect was the Count's butler, Bartholomew.

The reason was because he was in charge of the house seal.

Of course, the butler would never admit that he had sent that letter. He was a member of the Count's household, and if disaster struck House Formal, he would be caught in it as well. However, surely he would be the only one with the chance to use the house seal and House Formal's stationery, right?

Just as Persia was looking for an untouched place on the butler's body to bruise, the men supervising the interrogation made their move.

"Enough."

Ltc. Youga was accompanied by a sergeant from 1st Recon, who would be their interpreter.

The two men had impassive expressions on their faces. Persia, Mamina and the head maid were uneasy at the cold attitude Japan was showing to House Formal.

"No, we can't stop now, we haven't uncovered the truth yet."

The head maid was getting desperate. She had to hand the truth and the true culprit over to Youga, no matter the cost. As long as they could find the true culprit, they could clear up the misunderstanding. In other words, it was their sole ray of hope.

"But this man refuses to talk."

"No, I'm sure we can make him talk."

"Head maid, you're wasting time."

Wasting time. Those words sounded like a death sentence for House Formal.

"How could that—"

Just as Youga was about to speak, a knocking came from the warehouse door.

"Lieutenant Colonel, you rang?"

“Oh, we’ve kept you waiting. Come in.”

“Where’s this place? It’s so dark…”

The man whose excitement was out of place in this grim, dark dungeon was a medical officer (1st Lieutenant) in the JGSDF. However, his words seemed to lighten the oppressive atmosphere here. The head maid and the other maids wondered what Youga was going to do.

“Sorry, could you lend us a hand?”

The medical officer nodded with a “Hmph, I got it” and then withdrew a syringe from his bag. Then he took out an ampoule, snapped off the head, and filled the syringe with a drug.

“And now…”

Youga asked Persia and the maids to step back, and then he looked into the old butler’s face.

“We will not hit you.”

That made the butler groan, “Is, is that so. Then, please listen to me. I, I don’t know anything.”

While the interpreter was translating for Youga, he withdrew a piece of paper from his satchel. This was not the paper sent to Delilah, but a photocopy. In addition, it also showed the fingerprints of the people who had touched it.

“Then, you said you do not recognize the letter that was sent to Delilah, right?”

“Of course. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Is that so? If you remember, you should tell us now. Here, look closer.”

Youga indicated the fingerprints on the letter.

“These prints should be familiar to you as, hm, how shall I put it… ah, claw marks. These are imprints of fingertips. Their presence on an object indicates that the owner of these fingerprints has touched that object before.”

As the butler heard the translated words, he turned pale and his body started trembling.

“The fingerprints in red belong to Delilah. Then, there are two other fingerprints which do not belong to her. Now, if these fingerprints don’t belong to you, then all will be well.”

As he said this, Youga tightly grasped the butler’s hand. The interpreter brought a fingerprint pad and a sheet of paper along.

The old butler’s body went stiff, and he struggled madly to resist.

“What’s this? Why are you resisting us? It’ll be over in a moment if you just cooperate. All you need to do is prove these fingerprints are not yours, and you will be absolved of guilt.”

The old butler grit his teeth, desperately trying to keep his hands shut.

“Everyone, can you help me out?”

Mamina and Persia were only too glad to help Youga. They held the old butler’s hand, pried his fingers open, and obtained prints from all ten of his fingers.

“It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me, it really wasn’t me,” the butler muttered as she shook uncontrollably.

In front of him, Youga compared the butler’s fingerprints to the ones on the photocopied letter. Well, he did that, but in the darkness of the dungeon, there was no way to make a proper comparison. So this was basically going through the motions to frighten the butler.

However, even before the comparison, one could already figure out the truth from his reaction while they were taking his fingerprints.

“Hmm~ well, that’s a shame. It seems you told a lie. Could you tell us why?”

The trembling butler was still surprisingly stubborn. He shook his head frantically like he had a seizure, wordlessly denying Youga.

“Perhaps he has some reason why he can’t speak.”

After hearing those words from the interpreter, Youga turned to the medical officer. The man stepped forward and tied a rubber tourniquet around his arm, and then disinfected the butler’s arms with alcohol.

The butler did not know what the medical officer was going to do, and stared in surprise at his arms.

At this stage, Persia and Mamina were willing to help with any task. They pinned down the butler’s arms so they could not move. The head maid watched in silence. She had the feeling that Youga could get the truth out of the butler.

After the tourniquet made the butler’s veins appear, the medical officer pressed the tip of a surgical needle into it. Then, he screwed the syringe onto the other end. This way, even if the butler twitched, he would not have to worry about the needle tip coming out. This was a common technique used in mental hospitals, in order to administer tranquilizers to confused patients that were flailing around.

The medical officer spoke to him in a mischievous tone.

“This is a drug called amobarbital. Once it is injected into your body, you will lose the ability to think, and you’ll answer any questions asked of you regardless of your will. Not bad, right? It doesn’t matter what you want to do, this drug will make you talk. So you won’t be breaking your agreement with whoever employed you.”

Of course, this drug was not a truth serum. However, after being shown the evidence, and being told that “It doesn’t matter what you want to do, this drug will make you talk”, the butler finally ceased his resistance.

The medical officer slowly depressed the plunger of the syringe and injected the drug into the butler’s veins. Then he released the rubber tourniquet, and let the drug circulate through the butler’s body. The butler’s consciousness blurred, and in the end his mind was clouded.

The medical officer continued depressing the plunger, until it bottomed out in the syringe. Amobarbital was a tranquilizer, and injecting a large quantity of it at once would put the butler to sleep. It was a very difficult task to keep the butler on just this side of consciousness, but the medical officer skilfully accomplished that task.

“Go ahead.”

Together with the medical officer, Youga began his questioning.

Colonel Imazu, of the JGSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force Headquarters — Operation Staff Unit's 2nd Branch, read Youga's report and clicked his tongue.

The report read: *There is an underground organization which seeks to damage the peace talks between Japan and the Empire. This incident was instigated by someone who sent a false order to one of House Formal's spies.*

After questioning the old butler, they were certain that he was the one who had leaked House Formal's stationery. However, his contact in Italica had fled. There were some traces, but that line of investigation terminated in a dead end.

Maintaining one's composure in a state of confusion.

No amateur could do that. Imazu keenly felt the importance of human intelligence in addition to other forms of intelligence gathering.

In order to stop incidents before they happened, they had to be faster than the enemy. The fact that they had prevented Delilah's assassination of Noriko was because Yanagida had been there by pure coincidence. Still, now that they knew there was an enemy, they could begin to formulate responses to them.

"The question is, who is our enemy?"

He had worked hard to gather suitable people for this, such as Defense Ministry suits, diplomats, Cabinet officers, as well as men from the Public Security Bureau. Imazu had assembled them here today to ask their opinions.

"We also need to plan our counterstrike against the enemy, once we learn who they are."

"Well, like I said before, the enemy knows of and can describe Noriko."

"Right. She's not an actress or a celebrity. She's someone that almost nobody in the Special Region would know, so that narrows down the suspect list greatly. In addition, the enemy knows her face well enough for a description, so it can't be a matter of a quick glance."

"Crown Prince Zorzal. He's the most likely suspect."

"Indeed. However, we also need to consider that this is what the opposition wants us to think. We need to consider him and everyone else around him. We'll ask Mochizuki Noriko about any relationships he might have with others, and then we'll thoroughly investigate them."

Imazu nodded, and one of his subordinates began preparations.

"There must be people who're unhappy with the peace talks between the Empire and Japan."

"I still think it's Zorzal."

"True, that fellow's pretty suspicious."

They had read Sugawara's reports on the patricians, and as such they knew Zorzal was part of the pro-war faction and did not want peace with Japan.

As they ventured guesses at their enemy's identity, they laughed maliciously.

"Oh, another thing. Our enemy also knows House Formal sent spies to Arnus."

“Wasn’t that the butler Bartholomew?”

“Bartholomew was just a sacrificial pawn in this. A quick look would have dug up a lot of suspicious things. In fact, the most suspicious thing is that he did not flee.”

“In other words, there’s another enemy agent in House Formal.”

According to Youga’s report, Bartholomew’s weakness was his debts and women. Traveling merchants could purchase blank paper with House Formal’s crest at a high price, and then after the enemy honey-trapped him, they could manipulate him at will. Therefore, the enemy was also one who could grasp and take advantage of his debts and his lust for women.

“If we investigate House Formal, we should be able to root out anyone connected to the enemy. Who knows, we might be able to pick the trail up again from where it went cold.”

“It’s not just in House Formal. We might have enemy agents in Arnus too.”

“Speaking of which, how long does information take to travel from Italica to the Capital?”

“Ahh, it’s annoying when we don’t have intel. By the distance, I’d say, 10 to 13 days?”

“This doesn’t include them moving at night, but it should be about that much.”

“The enemy agent knew Delilah would take action today. However, he does not know how it ended. Therefore, the enemy should be trying to gather as much information as possible.”

“Ahh...”

“As long as the enemy does not have some special way of transmitting information, reports of this incident should reach the Capital in 10 to 13 days.”

After listening to all of this, Imazu had a pretty good idea of their overall direction. However, he could not make this decision alone. Therefore, he asked the whole of 2nd Branch, “What should we do?”

The suits replied after some discussion.

“Though there are probably spies in House Formal, their number should be limited. That being the case, we should feed the count false information. After that, we’ll follow the clues and find where the enemy is hiding. It’s an old one, but a good one.”

“You might not need to deceive them. First, we release the information that the assassination failed. Then, we tell them that the delegates for the negotiation will be arriving in the Special Region soon. Then you leak information that the first round of talks and the first batch of captive repatriation will take place in Italica. The fact that Shirayuri Reiko, the PM’s aide, is coming with the first batch of captives should not be public knowledge, so we can use that against them too.”

“That ought to scare them. Who knows, they might even take direct action against the talks.”

“Suggestion. While we were investigating the people around Crown Prince Zorzal, we followed the trails to a dead-end. However if we release false information, we should be able to see who our man is by watching who takes the bait. However, if we do that we’ll need to pick one of our people to be our man on the inside.”

As he said that, he produced a name list of the personnel dispatched to the Imperial Capital.

“Right. This guy should be usable.”

One of the staff members pulled out a report from the mountain of documents on a nearby desk.

“This is the information collected from the ladies engaged in “Special Vocations” in Akusho. It includes various bits of gossip on patrician sons and daughters, as well as scandals on the Senators, provided by their own maids. Because these were largely hearsay, there was no real use for it before today. However, now we might have a chance to turn these people into collaborators.”

The men looked at each other, like kids about to play a prank.

Imazu rose to make his summation.

“Delilah was a good girl. She was the flower of our canteen.”

Everyone nodded in unison. They had all spoken to her before in the canteen.

“Gentlemen, we must find the ones who deceived her and spilled the blood of our countrymen. The enemy has the home ground advantage, but we have the advantage of speed. At the very least, we will be ten days faster than them. We must not lose here. Do you understand?”

And so, the counter-terrorist operation led by the 2nd Branch quietly began.

“This drink they call “brandy” is really something else. It’s definitely top-shelf stuff. It seems someone gave it away as a gift, and of late, all the patricians are begging for more. I tried it, of course, since everyone wanted some, and it’s good. It’s no wonder why those people who gorge themselves on gourmet cuisine keep wanting more of this.”

ALC - Imperial Capital Branch.

This was where the traders of the Imperial Capital brought in their goods.

Kurata busied himself with helping the cat and dog-eared girls in the shop. He spoke warmly to the traders, and then he tried turning the topic to Crown Prince Zorzal.

“However, information about the people in court is more profitable than information about the regular patricians. For example, the people around the Crown Prince have been buying up stuff. If it’s for his personal consumption, it might inflate the price.”

“The Crown Prince-dono, is it? Well, it’s difficult. The people who do business on his behalf are all very stubborn, they hardly leave any openings.”

“So it’s impossible, huh.”

Kurata sighed. So far, he had been unable to get past the obstacle of the Imperial traders. Even getting close to them was difficult. He was out of ideas.”

Suddenly, a trader spoke to him.

“Oi, oi, don’t give up so soon. I’m just about to get started.”

“You mean...?”

“Actually, his Highness has been organizing banquets at various patricians’ homes. Since they’re unofficial, even a minor merchant like me has a chance to do business. You should know the rest, right?”

“I see, I see. So, a little discount, then?”

“Ahh, yes. That’ll do.”

The two men shook hands.”

“I’ll give priority to the stuff you ordered. So when do you want me to send it over? And the location? Your guys will be handing it to the chef, right?

“What do you mean? That’s a strange way to make a transaction...”

“Look. Since we’re sending over drinks and ingredients, why don’t we hand it to the experts? That way it’ll show off our wares’ value. You give this stuff to a skilled chef, he makes good food and hooks his customers on it, and then we’ll make more money, right?”

“Oho, my salesman spirit is burning! I’m counting on you. If this keeps up, I’ll be involved even if it’s just a bunch of leftovers. Deal!”

The two of them shook hands again.

“Furuta-san, your Ma Nuga meat is really popular! Could you teach me how to make it later?”

Furuta was turning and twisting a frying pan in front of the kitchen fires.

He had infiltrated this kitchen as a substitute chef. The maids he was talking to were busy running back and forth between the kitchen and the guest tables. Furuta replied:

“Alright. In exchange, why don’t you introduce a few of the guests to me? Most connoisseurs have their own preferred tastes. Ladies, for example, would prefer sweeter stuff. And if possible, I hope you can go into detail as well as telling me where they’re from.”

“Yay~ well, today’s guests are mostly military. Is that enough?”

“More details would be better. Young officers generally prefer saltier flavors, while you need to cut down the oil and salt for older soldiers and flavor with spices instead. If possible, I’d like to know their names as well.”

“Mm. Got it. Then, I’ll keep my ears open.”

After the maid finished, she picked up the tray of meat Furuta had just finished roasting, and took it back to the banquet.

After that, a very rude Zorzal barged into the kitchen.

“Who made this Ma Nuga meat?!”

The great shout startled Furuta for a moment. After all, he was an infiltrator, so he had to be wary of being found out. The fear of being exposed clutched at his heart.

And then, Zorzal noticed the other chefs were looking at Furuta. He stalked towards him with surprising speed.

‘No good. Does he suspect me? Is my cover blown?’

The more he thought about it, the closer his hand strayed to the 9mm pistol stowed under his apron.

However, it would seem his worries were misplaced. Zorzal patted Furuta on the shoulder.

“Was it you, then?”

“Y-yes. Yes, I made it!”

“I’ve been looking for you for a while. I think you cooked at Piña’s party, right? No, I know it. I can’t forget that flavor.”

“Eh, ah, yes, I have cooked for Princess Piña before.”

Furuta drew himself up and stood still.

“I knew it. This taste is fantastic. Actually, I have a job for you. Come to the palace tomorrow. You can do that, right?”

This was as good as saying, “I won’t take no for an answer”. For some time now, Zorzal’s attitude was a prideful one that brooked no refusal. Then Zorzal grabbed the freshly-made Ma Nuga meat nearby and walked away.

Furuta was stiff with tension. Just watching Zorzal leave was all he could do.

After that, the Warrior Bunny Zorzal was pulling behind him gave Furuta a look that seemed more like an appraisal.

“Ah, who’s that?”

The maid who had just returned to the kitchen shrugged.

“You mean that Warrior Bunny? I have no idea. She’s probably a pleasure slave his Highness took a liking to. Normally, he drags her everywhere. But her eyes are pretty arrogant. I don’t know what his Highness did to her, but she’s just a Warrior Bunny.”

Judging by what the maid said, Furuta was not the only one whom she looked at that way.

Two Phantom jets soared through the sky of the Special Region, like silver swords.

Above the clouds.

The sun shone down on them, against the backdrop of an azure sky. With nothing to block the sunlight, the Phantom jets’ metal skins heated up under the scorching rays of the sun.

“Currently at angels 10.”

The two-plane flight maintained their high altitude.

Several lines appeared on the copilot’s HUD. Kurihama, the copilot, adjusted his course in response to his fuel consumption.

The pilot Kamikoda maintained his situational awareness with mechanical efficiency. Behind and to the side, their fellow aircraft was in charge of determining their heading.

“Kamikoda, 10 minutes until the border. Our speed is 280 knots, bearing 190. Turn Heading Now.”

“Oh...”

“Roger.”

His partner craft followed the turn beautifully.

“Complete.”

Kurihama adjusted the flight systems with computer-like efficiency, to the point where normal people might be frustrated by having to put in the sheer effort that Kurihama was making.

However, this way, they would not have to worry about going off course because they had lost their bearings. In addition, this decision brought out the greatest ability of the plane, which relieved Kamikoda.

They soared through the virgin sky.

Since there was no GPS navigation network here, they had to rely on maps and landmarks, as well as their position as calculated by their instruments. After that, they would determine their heading, and finally, they would plot their course based on the weather reports and their fuel consumption. Kurihama handled all of these, except for combat operations.

Because of this, they could show off the Phantoms’ full power.

Because of this, Kamikoda and the others could be here.

“It’s been three days already. We should be able to see it by now, right?”

“Well, if you see it, don’t launch an attack. We’re just going to evaluate its fighting ability.”

“Got it.”

“Well, we say that, but if the unexpected happens, we’ll be counting on you, Kamikoda-san.”

The voice of Mizuhara from the partner craft came over his earphones.

“Oi, that’s enough, jii-san, you’re too old for words like that. Mind yourself a little, okay?”

Just as Nishimoto made his joke, there was a ping on the sensors.

“Radar contact, bearing 127. Altitude 3250. Combat Maneuvering, go!”

“Oh.”

Kamikoda made as if to flip a switch, and tilted the flaps of his craft, lowering its nose. The engines made a great noise as he pushed the throttle to the maximum.

The horizon loomed ahead of him like a wall. That was correct. It was just like a wall. The powerful G-forces crushed their bodies as they plunged toward the ground through a hole in the clouds.

“Huh. Target’s at 180, altitude unchanged. It’s close, and it’s definitely alive. Radar returns are way too weak. Its RCS is small enough that it could count as a stealth aircraft.”

“Huh, in other words, we have to close in on it. All right, we’ll do this by the book and hit it from behind.”

He breathed with his diaphragm to withstand the Gs, and at the same time, he finished his preparations, along with his copilot.

The other plane would be orbiting high above to observe the battle. In addition, they would provide support in the event it was needed. Apart from that, it would not move much while completing its mission.

The Phantom tore through the air and its engine roared.

The Dragon's red-scaled body appeared in the center of the HUD (heads-up display). The way it glided on air currents was oddly beautiful.

"That's the one."

"Target sighted. Identified as Special Region Type A Dangerous Beast, AKA Dragon. Target confirmed."

In this world, the strong would devour the weak.

In a sense, the dragon was just feeding itself. Assigning it the label of "Dangerous Beast" for its activities was merely human arrogance. In this world, the Dragon was simply an apex predator.

However, humanity disregarded that fact and hunted it. They would not permit it to roam around and kill people. That too was a purely human reason.

"If we want to, we should be able to hit it."

"Even if we hit it, we won't be able to bring it down. The 20mm will be as effective against it as a water pistol. Don't make pointless attacks. We don't want to show all our cards to the enemy."

"Roger."

As planned, Kamijoda opened the plane's throttle to the max and approached the Dragon from the rear before buzzing past it at close range. In other words, he was taunting it.

Caught in the jet's powerful slipstream, the startled Dragon briefly lost control of its limbs.

Kamikoda did a barrel roll and ended up in the Dragon's vicinity, while maintaining the same speed and heading as the Dragon. It was like hitting a dog on the head — it would snap at you. The disruption of its flight seemed to have wounded the Dragon's pride, and it immediately gave chase to the Phantom.

"Hey, I think we made it mad."

15,000 feet above the ground, Nishimoto watched as the Dragon chased after Kamikoda before speaking to Mizuhara.

"It's got a tight turn radius."

"That's because it can flex its body. Looks like we can't dogfight it."

"Next, we'll see how well it can climb."

Kamikoda opened the throttle and began to gain altitude.

The Dragon continued its pursuit. Kamikoda teased the Dragon by letting it almost catch up, and then he applied more power to pull ahead. All the while, he was observing the Dragon's limits.

“Still climbing at 3600, 3700, 3800 with wings. Its forward thrust is a lot higher than expected.”

“Next, sudden descent.”

The climbing jet suddenly angled its nose down into a steep dive.

Drawn by gravity, the plane began to free-fall. The Dragon also stopped beating its wings, tucking them close to its body as it plummeted after the Phantom.

“Crap! Kamikoda, more thrust!”

This was the advantage of the Dragon’s ability to freely control airflow with its wings.

It closed the distance in moments.

“Altitude, 1000, 700, 500”

Although the lock-on alarm did not sound in the cockpit, the two of them felt a surge of tension that was pretty close. In an attempt to shake the Dragon, Kamikoda skimmed across the ground and pulled up after that.

As expected, the Dragon gave chase, but it seemed to understand that it could not climb fast enough, so it gave up the chase and hovered in mid-air.

“It can hover...”

“It’s on par with a VSTOL aircraft, that’s for sure.”

“From its mobility, it looks to be about the same as an attack helicopter. Pretty smart, too.”

Kamikoda levelled out his plane, and maintained his altitude at 2000 feet.

“Kurihama, done with your assessments?”

“Ah, basically.”

“Hm, then it should be our turn, then.”

“At least, I want to say that.”

Kurihama’s chin was trembling as he said that. After all, Kamikoda had pushed the airframe to its limits several times.

“Battles are not won with airframe performance. You need spirit as well. We need to see what this fellow can do. Plus we can’t chicken out and leave the job half-finished. Right?”

As Kamikoda said this, he steered his plane until he was facing the Dragon.

The Phantom fighter was rapidly closing in on the Dragon.

He could see the Dragon’s face in the HUD.

“Looks like it’s only got one eye. Put us on a collision course.”

The Dragon’s body grew swiftly in their field of vision.

“This is good intel,” Kurihama said. That said, he did not know how useful that blind spot of the Dragon’s would be when they closed in.

Full throttle, and then afterburners.

The sound barrier shattered, creating an explosion and a shock wave

This was a game of chicken.

The Dragon lazily spread its wings while keeping its body still, and then it flapped forward while keeping its body straight. It moved regally, as befitting of a king of the sky.

“Then, how about this?”

The aircrew chief glared at Kamikoda and Kurihama.

“We don’t have many spares, and a lot of the parts are nearing the end of their service life.”

“Yeah, we know that.”

Kamikoda and Kurihama’s planes were well scorched. The canopy glass had turned cloudy under the effects of high temperatures.

Although one could not tell from the outside, the radar and other electronics were damaged from the heat.

The aircrew chief did his inspection and confirmed the grave damage both planes had sustained. The fuel systems showed signs of heat damage as well.

It was sheer luck that they had avoided its razor-sharp claws.

Kamikoda clenched his fists.

“That cheating bastard, it used its fire breath in a no-weapons duel! How unmanly is that?!”

“You moron, do you think a giant lizard cares about that? Besides, that fellow might be female.”

Chapter 14

Rain poured from the sky, turning the road into a river.

The sky was dark and overcast, which made it hard to tell where the potholes were under the water. Every time a wheel sank into one, the HMTV would lurch heavily.

Once they got bogged down in mud, getting out would be difficult. Itami judged that carrying on in the rain would be too dangerous, and so he turned off the HMTV's engines to take a break.

"The rain around here's really heavy. Even though it was clear in the morning, it ended up like this in an instant..."

After hearing Yao say that, Itami decided to wait for the weather to improve before moving on.

The noise of the engine was gone, and only the splashing of raindrops remained.

Itami opened the door, causing the rain pooled in the roof canvas to wobble around. The sides of the HMTV were open to the elements, so the wind and rain blew in from there. Since the sun in this region was quite strong, having the sides open was just nice.

The rain came in from both sides, but fortunately the vehicle was big and the interior was not too soaked. The passengers watched the storm outside their windows and waited for it to stop.

Itami took a map and a compass from his backpack, in order to confirm their next direction.

"Our current location is PDG • 34 • RE249.487311."

Because the latitude and longitude of the Special Region was not determined yet, the mapmakers drew arbitrary lines on the aerial recon photos for use in navigation.

Along the way, Itami asked Yao about the route she had taken to Arnus, in order to learn what lay ahead of them.

She set out from Modabarden Village, then curved south around the base of Mt. Colro, passing through the Terilia Plains, then going past Metabal, Gremina, Hebrae and Tongut.

Itami drew a curvy line that connected all the places Yao mentioned. They would backtrack along this route to Yao's home.

It was not far in a straight line, but the mountains and valleys in the way meant they could not travel that way. However, the path Yao had taken instead went in a great big curve around the countryside, which was why she had taken a month to reach Arnus.

"It couldn't be helped, I was chasing the rumors of the Men in Green. If I'd known you were in Arnus from the beginning, I wouldn't have detoured so much."

Rory and Lelei stared mutely at Yao.

If what she said was true, that meant she would have been collecting rumors from streets and villages, and then after that she would have reached Arnus a month later. From that point of view, the time she spent in Arnus would have been very short.

“We’re now on the Terilia Plains,” Itami said as he checked the location off on the map.

“After that, I went around the base of Mt. Colro in order not to be noticed by the Dragon, and then I followed the stream forward. Well, it doesn’t matter whether you’re coming or going, it’s difficult in both directions.”

They could only travel by daylight, and they could not move quickly where there were no roads.

Although it was called the Terilia Plains, it was not nearly as flat as it sounded. Itami had hoped to make some progress, but the huge boulders everywhere forced him to steer around them, so in the end, they only moved a little faster than normal.

Itami looked at the map and calculated how long it would take to get there.

Two thirds of the cargo bed was taken up by fuel cans and crates containing LAMs (110mm antitank rocket launchers) large quantities of explosives, all sorts of equipment, ammunition, food and water.

There were other things as well. The girls had piled things onto the HMTV like they were running away from home, and currently, Tuka was asleep on a thick fur blanket in the crevices between all the other items. She looked all right, but Itami knew he did not have much time left.

Tuka had gotten worse ever since they set out from Arnus. Then again, it made sense when one thought about it. How could Tuka’s father operate a complicated HMTV so naturally? It must have caused a huge conflict in her heart.

Because Tuka would occasionally be tormented by intense headaches, Lelei put her to sleep with magic. Thanks to that, they could speak about things that they could not let Tuka hear.

“Yao. The Dragon was sighted in the Schwarz Forest, right?”

Itami indicated a point on the map, and Yao nodded. She traced a circle around that point with her finger.

“Strictly speaking, its territory appears to encompass the entire southern area, which also includes the Schwarz Forest.”

“That big?”

“If you want to find the Flame Dragon, head south from the Schwarz Forest to the Lordom Valley. The Flame Dragon hunts in the same place. We can ambush it there.”

The Lordom Valley was where Yao’s tribe was hiding.

“Our objective is to let Tuka avenge herself on the Flame Dragon, not to save your people.”

“However, the people there know where the Flame Dragon’s lair is.”

“That’s true,” Itami nodded. Then he decided to head for the ravine where Yao’s tribe was.

Yao smiled in satisfaction, and Itami felt like hot nails had been hammered through him.

“Let me get this straight. I’m not going to fight there. If the Dragon can fly around freely, we’re at too much of a disadvantage.”

“Then what should we do?”

“Right now, the plan is to set up an ambush in its nest. The specifics will depend on the local terrain.”

“What terrain would be good?”

“For example...”

The Dragon could not turn freely in narrow spaces. If its nest was not a place like that, they would have to pick another battlefield, lure it there, and destroy it.

“If you need a decoy, let me know. I can get my people to help.”

Yao spoke lightly, as though it was really that simple.

“Something feels strange about all of this. Why didn’t you just run away?”

Much like how Coda Village’s residents had abandoned it. There was that choice.

Yao answered, “Humans can do it, but Elves cannot.”

Elves could only live on land that suited them.

Humans could move around and build streets and settlements, but elves could not. They could not leave the Schwarz Forest that they were accustomed to. It was hard enough for them just to hide in Lordom Valley.

“Travelling is fine, though.”

Yao smiled, as though she were mocking herself.

Itami understood their situation as being able to travel on a boat, but not being able to live on it. Some people could live on the sea, but they could not. Much like how humans could only live on land, Dark Elves could only live in the forests.

Come to think of it, Tuka was taking good care of the forests at the foot of Arnus Hill. To her, it must have been a necessary environment.

“Still, is this all right?” Rory asked as she looked at the sleeping Tuka.

Of course, they could not tell Tuka the true purpose of this journey. All they had said so far was that they were heading south, towards Yao’s village.

“Ah. I was planning to bring her in front of the Flame Dragon, then tell her ‘This is the enemy who killed your father’.”

“She’ll definitely be mad at you for tricking her.”

She would be. But the fact was that using Tuka’s fantasy and pretending to be her father was already tricking her, in a sense. Itami smiled and said, “Why are you saying this now, after everything we’ve been through?”

“If that’s the case, we’re all accomplices,” Lelei said.

“Well, it can’t be helped. She can scold us all together,” Rory grinned, before patting Itami’s shoulder.

The Schwarz Forest was a vast domain that was often called “a sea of trees”.

It was far deeper than anyone could have imagined. In its furthest reaches, fallen tree trunks were covered in piles of rotting leaves, and over them grew the branches of gigantic trees. The roots on the ground

overlapped each other so thickly one could not see the ground, while above them the sky was blocked out by the spreading tree canopies. It was like stepping into a different world.

Of course, walking through here on foot was a difficult task, to say nothing of actually driving a vehicle in. They had no choice but to go around it. After making some progress toward the South, they decided to rest for the night. The next day, they followed the edge of the forest westward, before finally reaching Lordom Valley.

The Dark Elves were hiding in the caves here.

At a glance, this looked like pretty good terrain for a fight.

Like the name “valley” would suggest, the flat land was sliced open by the flow of a river into a narrow, twisting ravine. If they could get the Dragon to descend into the bottom of the ravine, they might be able to carry out an ambush on it. However, this place was far too narrow for the Dragon to squeeze in.

Come to think of it, this place was a place for the Dark Elves to hide. If the Flame Dragon could fit in here, they would be done for.

The bottom of the ravine was quite narrow. The river had scattered large and small rocks all around, and it looked like a good spot for fishing. However, there was no way for the Dark Elves to gather enough food from this place. They would need to leave the Valley eventually, and the Flame Dragon was counting on that.

In addition, the sudden, torrential rain would raise the level of the river until it seeped into their caves. They had to struggle every day so their possessions and food get would not get washed away. It was a hard life.

“Please, stop here.”

Yao was waiting for Itami and the rest on top of a cliff. Hardly affected by the muddy ground after the rain, she nimbly descended to the bottom of the valley. After passing through a narrow passage which could only fit one person, she descended another slope and reached the bottom.

Itami shut off the engine.

And just at this moment, Tuka woke up, stretching her arms like she was cheering “banzai” as she stretched. Then, like a child, she rubbed her eyes in a very adorable way.

However, she immediately grimaced and said, “the petrol stinks”.

Tuka was sleeping amidst the petrol cans and the ammunition and explosives boxes, so it was only natural she would say that. The HMTV did not have glass except for the windscreen, so when in motion, the air from outside would ventilate the interior. However, when the vehicle was stationary, the fumes would sear the nose, though it was not harmful.

“Did you have a good rest?”

“Mm, I did.”

After Tuka said that, she dismounted.

Then she stretched again, taking in a lungful of the fresh air outside.

After surveying the landscape, Itami took his pistol and got off the vehicle. Since this was Flame Dragon territory, he had to be prepared. That said, 7.62mm rounds were useless against it. Still, he surveyed his surroundings with his binoculars. He paid close attention to the sky.

“Where is this place?”

In response to Tuka’s question, Itami said, “This is Lordom Valley. Yao’s people are taking refuge here.”

“I see, so we’re here at last. We can finally get rid of that Dark Elf.”

Tuka’s opinion of Yao was difficult to explain in words. As for Yao, she was home at last, so she could breathe a sigh of relief.

“But to think, she lives in a place like this...”

Tuka nervously looked down into the ravine, at the river flowing far, far below her.

Elves loved the green of the forest, but there was none of that to be seen here.

The valley only had rocks and sand. The closest thing to vegetation here were a few shrubs and the weeds that covered the ground.

“Why did they choose to live here?”

It would seem she had let herself forget about how Yao and her people had been attacked by the Dragon. She had completely excised everything related to the Flame Dragon from her mind. Therefore, all Itami could say was, “Who knows? There should be a reason for it.”

Even while he was talking, he did not fail to watch the sky.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Suddenly, seven to eight dark elf men and women appeared out of the landscape. They were holding bows, and they surrounded Itami and the others.

“Yao, you have returned at last. But have you forgotten why we sent you out?”

This was a cave at the very bottom of the valley, where sunlight could not reach. Yao was on one knee, lit by the dim light of the nearby lanterns. She was surrounded by seven of her tribe’s elders in a horse-shoe shape. Face toward the ground, she carefully replies, “No, I have not forgotten.”

“It has been two months since we sent you forth. Many of our people have died in this time. We have lost contact with the others who scattered to other lands.”

“We had started to think you had given up your quest after not having come back for so long.”

Yao looked up to the three most important ones among the elders and said, “I have brought a Man in Green back, in order to help defeat the Flame Dragon.”

“Ohhhh!”

The elders exclaimed as one.

“Well done. Mm. Well done.”

“Then, then where is the Man in Green?”

“I left them at the entrance of the Valley, because bringing them here would cause unnecessary trouble,”

Yao's answer made the elders frown. Then they asked her in a surprised tone, "Why did you not invite them here? Guests who have travelled a long way should not be made to wait. It is rude."

"Indeed. A lack of etiquette will reflect poorly on our tribe."

The elders rose at once and made to leave the cave. But Yao darted in front of them, saying, "Please wait, please wait," as she prepared to explain the situation.

"What is the reason for this?"

"This is the reason the Men in Green refused to defeat the Flame Dragon. I have committed a grave sin." Yao told them what she had done in Arnus. She paid particular attention to what she had done to Tuka, narrating it in extensive detail.

"From our point of view, we were indeed asking you your reasons, as well as the purpose of what you did. However, what we wanted to ask was, is this matter really important?"

Yao was asked about her actions because the elders did not understand them. She had expected to be rebuked for what she had done. After all, Yao felt that she had committed both an unethical act and a grave sin against Tuka.

But the elders did not care about that. This made Yao feel that there was something wrong with her moral values.

"So you are saying that this Itami person came to save that Elf."

"Yes. This Itami is also one of the Men in Green."

"A wise and considerate person may decide to leave a friend to die if he determines there is danger."

"However, a compassionate person may step into danger, perhaps even break the rules, to save a friend."

"Mm, he must be quite a man. If he is unmoved by fame or fleshly desire, he may well be a person worthy of our trust. Then, that Elf has come along to exterminate the Flame Dragon?"

"Yes. Itami plans to bring Tuka before the Flame Dragon and tell her the truth."

The elders saw Yao's tortured expression. They sighed and looked at each other.

"Yao, you seem unable to accept what you have done. Were we in your place, we would have done as you did. This was a necessary action to complete your mission. Regardless of what people say, we must use any means necessary to do it. That is the virtue of us Dark Elves."

"Indeed. Even trickery is permitted. You have done well, Yao."

After reflecting on Yao's actions and her lack of morality, they heaped praise on her.

"Do you find the actions you took to carry out your mission unbearable? However, this guilt is not yours alone."

"Indeed. We ordered you to use any and all means to complete your task."

"You were simply following orders. We will all share the responsibility with you."

The elders viewed Yao's actions as representative of the entire tribe, and then they began discussing the appropriate compensation for this task.

"However, all this was the result of my actions. If compensation is needed, should I not be the one to offer it?"

The elders replied in depressed tones to Yao, who was insisting that she should offer to be the compensation.

"And what do you intend to do?"

With an eager look on her face, she replied, "Please leave it to me."

"As for you, casually betting your life is disgraceful. It is not atonement. It is merely taking the easy, despicable way out, and that will only compound your sins."

"That does sound like something you would say. Then, if you truly wish to atone, then you cannot choose an easy path. You must take the longer, harder path, and you cannot carry that weight alone."

"Then what should I do?"

"Obviously, you must help defeat the Flame Dragon. In addition, you must defend that Elf who is so precious to that Man in Green."

"Naturally, we will gather our warriors to help."

"Also, I believe the Man in Green left his army and came here on his own. In order to prevent him from returning to a messy situation, how about offering gifts and our thanks to his superiors?"

"The gratitude of the Dark Elves alone will not be enough. The Flame Dragon has scourged many kingdoms and tribes. If you gather them all to offer their rewards and thanks, it might be enough to appease the wrath of his superiors."

"Mm. I shall do this."

The elders decided on their plans for the future. At the same time, they drew up plans that Yao herself had not even thought of.

Yao's way of thinking had been swiftly demolished by the elders. At the same time, she also realised that she alone would not be able to restore Itami's reputation, so she stood aside and waited.

"Then, let us go welcome the Man in Green."

"Oh. We shall go receive the Man in Green who once drove off the Flame Dragon."

Tao followed the elders out of the cave.

But at this moment, a shockwave came from a thunderous explosion in the valley.

"Shit! It's the Flame Dragon!"

The shouts of the Dark Elves rose from all around them.

The Dark Elf male who had approached Itami and his group to check them out was snatched up by the swooping Flame Dragon. His legs thrashed from between the gaps in the Flame Dragon's fangs, and the huge beast chewed and swallowed him in one gulp.

"Aaah, ah, ah, aaaawaah, aah, ah—"

Tuka had seen the whole thing from start to finish, and she froze up. Standing still in front of a Flame Dragon was nothing short of suicide.

The other elves began fleeing for their lives, and some of them raised their bows to fire on the Flame Dragon. However, their arrows were useless against the Dragon's armor-like scales.

The Flame Dragon completely disregarded the Elves. Instead, it focused all its attention on the frozen Tuka. Then it opened its blood-stained maw and lunged at Tuka.

Just as Tuka was about to be consumed by the jaws of death, a great crash of stone shattering echoed throughout the Valley.

Like a black petal borne on the wind, Rory Mercury charged the Flame Dragon and struck a mighty blow with her halberd. The massive slab of steel struck the Flame Dragon square on the jaw.

However, even that mighty blow could not shatter the Flame Dragon's resilient scales. Still, the heavy impact of the attack smacked the Flame Dragon's face away.

It was as bizarre a scene as an ant uppercutting an elephant.

And then, the Flame Dragon collapsed onto the ground. It threw up a cloud of dust that flew everywhere. The impact of its fall shook the ground and rang like thunder.

"So strong..."

The Dark Elves stared in awe.

"duge-main"

Right after Lelei cast her spell, a series of rings made of magical light formed in front of her.

Lelei snapped her fingers. In response, the powerful blast wave surged out in a straight line and struck the Flame Dragon's body.

However, the ray of magic power bounced off the Flame Dragon's scales and buried itself in the ground.

The Flame Dragon nimbly got back to its feet with the help of its flapping wings. It knew it was at a disadvantage on land, and it kicked itself off the ground and soared into the air.

Rory attempted to pursue, but the Flame Dragon's breath drove her back down.

The Apostle of Emroy, God of War, swung her halberd so forcefully that the wind of its passage cleaved the high-temperature exhalation apart. However, the Flame Dragon took advantage of her lowered guard and followed up with a swipe of its sharp claws.

"Kya~an!"

Rory managed to evade the claws, but her small body was still sent flying by the Flame Dragon's paw.

She landed with both feet on the ground, her momentum digging two trenches into the ground as she slowed to a halt. Then Rory grabbed her halberd in a power stance, wiped her face clean of mud with the back of her hand, and licked at the blood flowing from a small cut on her lip.

“Not bad.”

The battle was a stalemate. Neither side had struck a decisive blow against the other.

Lelei created a second series of light rings. The Flame Dragon understood what it was and got out from in front of her.

The light rings were very hard to re-orient once formed, so all she managed to do was carve out a hole in the ground. Lelei clicked her tongue in frustration.

“Ha, haa, haha, haa, haa...”

Tuka was having trouble breathing, and she shuddered uncontrollably.

Itami grabbed Tuka and bore her down to the ground as Rory smote the Flame Dragon mightily.

“Ah, ah, awa, naa...”

Itami said to the panting Tuka, “Tuka, look carefully, look carefully at that....”

He embraced Tuka from behind and pressed both his hands on her face and forced her to look at the Flame Dragon.

“That’s the Flame Dragon that killed your father. Do you understand?”

Tuka closed her eyes and tried to turn away, but Itami used all his strength to stop her.

“Look! Look at it! That’s the Flame Dragon that burned your village! It’s the one that killed your father!”

“No, no way, Father’s not dead, because father—”

“I’m not your father. I’m just a stranger. You’re not my daughter!”

“Hiiiiiiiiii, no, why are you saying these cruel things? Somebody save me!”

Tuka’s heart was being torn apart. Itami’s words and the cold reality before her eyes assaulted her relentlessly.

The battle of the Flame Dragon versus Lelei and Rory was finished in an instant. Now, the Flame Dragon surveyed the scene. It seemed to be looking for an enemy from its memory.

Tuka saw the arrow stuck in the Dragon’s eye.

What she saw next was the image of her father fading away as she plunged into the well, and the sharp teeth of the Flame Dragon jaws behind him.

“That, that is—”

“That’s right, that bastard killed your father! Shoot it! Take it down, kill it! Let it all out!”

“No way! I can’t do it. Nobody can beat a monster like that!”

Still holding Tuka, Itami got off the HMMV and grabbed a LAM from the pile in the back. He did not know when the enemy would show up, so he prepared one of them for use at any time.

“This LAM took out one of its arms!”

As Tuka saw the LAM, the Flame Dragon howled and kicked off the ground, flying up into the air. The great cry robbed her legs of strength. Since Itami had been through this before, he didn’t freeze up completely.

“Shit, that bastard remembers the spanking it got from this!”

Once the Flame Dragon took to the air, Rory’s halberd would not be able to reach it. Lelei’s magic was useless against fast-moving targets.

Rory tried to jump up and attack the Flame Dragon several times, but she was driven back by either its right paw or a stream of flames.

Lelei’s magic was very destructive, but it was not instantaneous and thus easily avoided.

And then, the Dark Elves arrows did no damage even if they hit.

They thought that all they could do was wait for the Flame Dragon to leave.

The Flame Dragon soared up into the sky, where Rory could not reach it at all, and leisurely spread its wings to keep it hovering in the air while it turned its back to them.

However, Itami raised the LAM and held Tuka rightly from behind.

In order not to let her run away from reality again, he could not show his powerlessness in front of the Flame Dragon.

He took aim at the airborne Flame Dragon’s back, and pressed Tuka’s finger on the trigger. She had to do this herself.

“You can do it. Look carefully. That’s the enemy. Use your strength and pull the trigger. Do it!”

Itami was shouting into Tuka’s ear.

“I can’t, I can’t do it!”

Itami forcefully restrained the crying Tuka, who was trying her best to struggle out of his grasp, while adjusting the LAM’s aim so that it would not miss.

“That’s enough, pull the trigger!”

Frightened of the voice shouting into her ear, drifting into a hazy dreamscape, Tuka rightly squeezed the handle.

She pulled the trigger, and a jet of flame roared forth from the rocket engine, driving its antitank warhead downrange.

As expected, the shot missed. However, it hit the side of the valley wall. Its thunderous explosion sent a shockwave through the Valley.

Once they heard the Flame Dragon had been driven off, all the Dark Elves emerged. From where they were hiding.

“The Men in Green came! And there’s Rory Mercury and the wizard girl!”

To the Dark Elves, who had been one-sidedly hunted and preyed upon, this was wonderful news. Now was the time to exterminate the Flame Dragon and return to their peaceful lives in the Schwarz Forest, so they all raised up their weapons.

They had heard of how the Flame Dragon was driven off. The Man in Green could do it. And he had the aid of the Apostle of Emroy and a wizard of the Lindon school.

And so, the Dark Elves hiding in the nearby hills, plains and the mountains gathered in Lordom Valley with vengeance in their hearts. By midnight, the narrow valley was filled with Dark Elves. Even more people arrived by the time the sun came up.

The elders were thinking, “To think there were so many people”, or “To think so few were left”. How long had they hidden? However, the days of waiting for extinction were over. The battle that would decide the fate of the Dark Elves was nigh.

They opened the precious food stocks to welcome Itami and the warriors. The cooks did their best with the meager ingredients they had in order to produce good dishes.

Elsewhere, Yao, who had brought them here, was showered in the praise of her friends and people.

Yao, who had once been nicknamed “Unlucky”, had never received a welcome like this before. She simply could not calm down.

Yao did not feel she was worthy to receive everyone’s praise, at least not before she had atoned for her sins. Yet, her idea of atoning for her sins was discarded by the elders as taking it lightly, so now she did not know what she should do.

Although she was safe now, a lot of people had gotten the wrong idea from her absence.

“What happened to Todorom?”

“He got eaten. Happened right after you left.”

“How could that be, even he died?”

“He was the one competing with you to be the messenger too. Ah, what a shame.”

A quick glance revealed that there were much fewer people of her age than before. After realising so many people had died, even Yao, who was used to misfortune, could not help but droop her shoulders.

“Yao, you idiot! Why didn’t you come back sooner? If you did, Medosa... Medosa...!”

Yao mutely bore the cry of despair from one of her friends, who had lost her lover.

“Yao, you idiot! You...!”

Anyone seeing Yao silently endure the unfair castigation from her friends would be inclined to forgive her. But to Yao, that unrestrained abuse was what she deserved right now.

In addition, there was the man who ran off with her friend. Now he came before her and said his wife was dead.

In truth, Yao did not mind embracing him again. However, she could not forgive her first love who had run off with her best friend. She should have refused him. However, she felt that it would be alright to grant him the comfort he sought. And then, she was surprised that she felt this way.

She realised that she was quite the masochist.

However, Yao was no longer in a situation where she could decide what happened to herself.

Yao thought of that, and thus she said, "I, I belong to the Man in Green." And then she turned around and fled from her friends.

Right now, Itami looked very demoralized.

"Dammit."

Tuka was curled up by the fireplace, asleep on Itami's lap. She was tired out from a bout of crying.

The Dark Elf elders who came to check on her felt that she had sealed off her heart to maintain balance in her spirit. When she suddenly understood what was going on, her pent-up emotions burst forth all at once. The pain was worse than normal, and Tuka was unable to bear it. Therefore, she ran away from reality and let Itami become her father.

Now, one false move might lead to an irrecoverable situation. The rest she was taking now was a warning sign of that.

Itami grabbed his head as he wondered how to deal with Tuka.

"Itami-dono, are you troubled?"

Itami sighed in response to Yao's question.

"I'm thinking about Tuka. Her whole mind is filled with Father this, Father that, and no matter how I try to deny it, she won't listen. I feel so... powerless."

"Once, when I lost my fiancé, I was depressed for several months. My heart still aches from time to time when I think about him."

"What, you had a fiancé?"

Yao pouted slightly and replied, "Yes, is that strange?"

Itami shook his head to indicate that was not the case, and then he turned the topic back to Tuka.

"Forget it. No matter, what, I need to bring her in front of the Flame Dragon again, even if I have to drag her."

Yao nodded in response to Itami's idea, "I belong to Itami now. I am ready to obey any orders you have."

After Yao said that, she sat down beside Itami, as though waiting for instructions from him.

"Ahhhh, what a pain, the halberd's edge won't harm it at all!"

Rory grumbled as she sharpened her halberd's edge.

She had considered just using the halberd as a bludgeoning object. Who knew, she might be able to lay it out with a good whack. Of course, the Dragon would not stand there and let her use it as a punching bag. Even with one arm, it was still strong and agile enough to keep up with Rory.

She did not think she would lose, but she did not think she could win either. The Flame Dragon was one of the worst matchups for Rory.

"Beating him to death's not fun at all..."

She disliked the feeling of crushing people to death. Cutting people up in one slice was much better. Just as Rory was muttering to herself, a Dark Elf elder came before her.

"Your Holiness. We are deeply grateful that you have come to this unsightly place."

Rory stopped polishing her halberd, and pointed it at the elder.

"That's fine. I didn't come for you."

"I understand that clearly. However, I pray you will not stay here. Please, come inside."

The elder ushered Rory into a cave, "It will be more comfortable here than by the riverside."

However, Rory shook her head in refusal. She had a look of disgust on her face.

"You know I can't go underground, right?"

"I heard you had a dispute with our god before, is that why?"

"..."

"No, I pray you will not be angry, but... I heard it was not a good thing."

"Why do I have to be that fellow's bride? Besides, all she wants is to use an enfleshed demigod as a pawn. I don't want to waste my remaining 40 years on boring stuff like that. Well, I did manage to meet an interesting man as a result."

"Oya? May I know who Your Holiness has her eye on?"

"I plan to stay with that fellow until he grows old and dies."

The Dark Elf's line of sight followed Rory's to Itami.

Itami was now seated down, and Tuka was sleeping on his lap.

And Yao was standing beside Itami, talking to him.

"Still, why did Hardy open such a big hole at Arnus?", As Rory said that, Yao sat beside Itami. Rory frowned, and then she stood up.

"A hole? Arnus?"

The abandoned elder had no idea what Rory was talking about.

Lelei was frustrated at the weaknesses of her magic.

Once her target started moving, it would be very hard to take aim.

The Flame Dragon could not possibly stay still while she was preparing her attack. That meant that it would not work unless she could pin it down.

Of course, given Lelei's current skills, she could not do it.

Lelei felt that she needed Itami and Rory's help, so she began looking for him. Then she saw him sitting down, sandwiched between Yao and Rory while Tuka slept on his lap. It made Lelei nauseous, and she stood up.

Nobody knew when it had started, but people were starting to gather around Itami.

While it was natural for Rory, Lelei and Yao to stay by his side, the Dark Elf elders and the warriors of the various tribes began clustering nearby.

The elders told Itami that the warriors from the tribes would accompany him when he moved out. However, to Itami, knowing the location of the Flame Dragon's lair was good enough. Therefore, he tried to explain to the elders about the dangers of the place they would be heading to, as well as many other things. The elders simply smiled to him in a way that suggested they could not accept no for an answer.

"Tomorrow morning, then."

"Sorry about that. Then, I need your people to help me carry some things."

"That's fine. Everyone who wants to go with you to exterminate the Flame Dragon is already here. Let us know if there's anything else you need help with. Nobody will refuse you."

"Indeed, indeed. All the young ones are prepared for this. Everyone feels that tomorrow will be a special day.

"Well, you say that, but we might not be able to finish it in one day. Just getting to the objective will take two to three days, longer if something happens.

The elders smiled at Itami's words.

"We understand. Since you plan to attack the empty nest, you won't be able to do anything if its master is home. However, the Men in Green are quite adept at cunning tactics, it seems."

Itami's plan to attack the Flame Dragon was to plant 75 kilos of C4 plastic explosive into its nest and blow it up when it came home to roost. It was an evil and despicable plan.

Itami was not interested in fighting it head on like a traditional hero. After all, Itami's specialty was running away from difficulties and finding ways to run away from difficulties.

If that was not enough to kill it, they would ripple fire LAMs into it. The Flame Dragon would take a fair bit of damage in the process, and it could push the situation in a favorable direction.

The elders had no idea what Itami meant by "explosives" and "explosions". They simply thought that if the Men in Green spoke of them, they must be very powerful.

"Why not let the young ones watch and learn?"

He said that, but when Itami looked at the people whom the elders considered “young ones”, they were all older than him.

For example, Yao looked like a bewitching 30 year old, but in truth she was 315 years old. Itami had had mixed feelings about this when he first found out. But when he thought about the age problem, he recalled the very young-looking Tuka and Rory, and decided to think of something else.

“Speaking of which, the way the Flame Dragon keeps hunting in the same places doesn’t seem very intelligent to men. Could it be that it’s not very smart?”

Lelei answered Itami’s question.

“The Flame Dragon has very long active and hibernation cycles. The more food it acquires and consumes, the longer it stays in hibernation. We do not feel that should be a problem.”

“I see... and how long is it active?”

“By rights, it should not have woken up for at least another 50 years.”

“And what does it do when it hibernates?”

“Well, it sleeps the way some animals hibernate in winter. There are records in scholarly books.”

“When it’s active it eats. When it’s hibernating it sleeps. What a pleasant life it leads. If only I were a Dragon...”

Itami was quite envious of it. To Itami, whose life was one long break, being able to add playing into that cycle would be his ideal form of life.

“It’s hardly a pleasant way of life. All living creatures have a lot to do during their active period. For example, besides catching food, they also have to build nests, fight over territory, and so on.”

Lelei’s words made everyone freeze.

In this world, there were some people who would frighten you if you went “Ahhhh” when you met them.

For instance, when a dentist wanted to drill your teeth.

For instance, when an assistant hair stylist snipped his scissors.

To a customer, they would normally relax and leave the haircut to the hairstylist. But if they heard the word “Ah”, they would panic.

Or perhaps when the captain of a passenger flight was talking to his passengers and was cut off half-way by a “This plane isn’t flying normally.” Anyone would feel a chill down their spine.

Similarly, Lelei’s words made Itami and the Elves straighten up.

There was a fatal flaw they had not noticed, but which would be soon brought to light. Their bodies shuddered in fear.

“What’s wrong?” Lelei asked nervously.

“Yeah, so like an animal, it reproduces during its active period and raises kids.”

“Oi, oi, oi don’t say that, I don’t want to meet Flame Dragon cubs.”

“Well Young Dragons shouldn’t be as bad as Flame Dragons.”

“Then how bad are they?”

“Ancient Dragons > Young Dragons > (mature subspecies) > Wyverns.”

The situation had not changed at all. As Itami heard this, he suddenly stood up.

“I forgot something, I’m heading back to get it,” Itami said as he began the preparations for going back. Yao was sobbing beside him, “How can you do this after coming all this way?” and the elders were in a panic.

Rory, who was holding Tuka, spoke to Itami.

“How about this girl?”

Itami exhaled deeply.

“Dragons only lay one or two eggs at a time. In addition, Ancient Dragons only reproduce once a century.”

Lelei continued explaining, as though to calm everyone down, and Itami relaxed, in more ways than one.

“That’s right, the chances should be pretty low.”

“Indeed, Itami-dono. I’ve only ever seen one Dragon.”

“That’s true. I doubt we’ll really be that unlucky.”

Itami felt more relieved as he said that.

However, the surrounding Dark Elves all shuddered and looked straight at Yao when Itami said “unlucky”.

“What? What happened?”

Itami could sense the change in the room, and asked about it.

“Nothing, that, it’s nothing... ahahahaha...”

Yao had broken out in a cold sweat since someone mentioned the word “unlucky”.



Chapter 15

It was clear that everyone did not know much about the Flame Dragon, but even so, they had to take up their weapons and fight. That was what it meant to be a warrior.

The Dark Elves equipped themselves with the gear that they were familiar with — sabers, katars, bow and arrows, and their trademark black leather armor.

There was something... special about the tight-fitting bondage armor they wore. It would have been one thing if only the women wore it, but more than half of the group were men and they wore the same armor that their female counterparts did.

I don't want to be seen with these guys... Itami thought as he glanced around like a wary herbivore.

“Itami-dono, the nine of us will accompany you on your mission.”

Yao greeted Itami as the representative of these men and women. Perhaps she might have understood how he felt. After that, they began introducing themselves.

From the males, Crow looked like a human man in his 40s, while Meto, Ban, Fen and Nokk looked to be about the same age as Yao. Kom looked like a teenager. After listening to them talking among themselves, Kom seemed to be the youngest of their group, at a mere 154 years old. For some reason, he felt that he had to respect them all as his elders. As for the females, Seimy and Nayu looked slightly younger than Yao.

In any case, they gathered together and said, “Please take care of us”, and then Itami began distributing the gear on the HMV. Said gear referred to the LAMs and the plastic explosives, as well as reels of detonating cord.

“Is this what they call the ‘Rod of Steel’...?”

The long metal tube looked weighty and potent to the Dark Elves, and they enthused over it.

“I’ve heard that this is not a magic item, but something called a weapon... but how do we use it? We should be able to use it too, right?”

“Ah, yes, I’ll teach you how to use it now.”

Since the Dark Elves were intelligent beings, not only did Itami have to distribute the equipment among them, but since he was entrusting them with weapons, he had to teach the Dark Elves the proper way of using them too. If they were horses, there would be no need to worry about them accidentally fiddling with the gear, but since they were sentient, if they made a mistake or fiddled around with it carelessly, there was a risk of an explosion which would blow them all up.

To that end, Itami carefully explained the operation of the LAM 110mm anti-tank rocket launcher to them.

Once the Dark Elves learned how to use it, they might think, “We can beat the Flame Dragon now”. It was obvious from the looks in their eyes that they hated the Flame Dragon bitterly, and there was a risk that they might be overcome by their emotions and wildly discharge a rocket the moment they saw it, especially since the possession of the weapons made them think, “We have to kill the Flame Dragon this time, no matter what”. Still, that enthusiasm was useful, although their final objective was to defeat the Flame Dragon and let Tuka deal the finishing blow. The first two points he drilled into them were “Do not touch the trigger if you’re not ready to fire” and “Do not fire if anyone is standing behind you”.

First, they would need to extract the LAM from its transportation package by pulling it out by the warhead, slowly and carefully. After removing the protective covering from the launcher tube, they would have to attach the firing assembly and weapon sight. The Dark Elves were not familiar with tools, so it would be faster for Itami to do it himself. While Itami was setting up a LAM, he could hear the Dark Elves around him cracking dirty jokes.

The person to Itami's side that said "If such a thick thing went into me, I'd break" must have been Seimy, and Ban proudly retorted "Mine's bigger". It would seem the Dark Elves were a sexually open tribe. He did not know if this was a good or bad thing, but if he got embarrassed, people might think he was a weirdo.

The Dark Elves could not read the instructions and warnings on the launcher tube. Therefore, Itami got around this problem by personally demonstrating how to set up the launcher. First, he pulled out the long probe on the tip of the warhead, removed the protective cover, and then turned it in the direction the arrow pointed. Then he explained that against tanks (or armor), the probe would need to be extended. Against humans, it could stay as it was. Naturally, against the Flame Dragon they would need to pull it out.

"Then, how do you make the thing on the front shoot out?" Fen asked as he lifted the LAM. He was muscular and much more physically imposing than Itami, so when he put it on his shoulder, he looked pretty cool.

"When the warhead touches something, it will explode. Just telling you is troublesome, so I should probably let you experience it. Also, in order to counteract the weapon's recoil, the LAM sprays out a countermass from the back with great force when you fire it. It's very dangerous, so make absolutely sure nobody's standing behind you when you fire it."

"Mm, I see..."

The Dark Elves picked out suitable targets and began practicing firing postures. Since the warhead was very heavy, everyone realised that tracking a mobile target was difficult.

"Then, what about those crates and that rope?"

Kom, the Dark Elf who looks like a boy but who was 154 years old, looked at the rest of the gear. Counting the weight of the LAMs and the other stuff, each of them would be carrying 20 kilos of equipment.

"Oh, that's the explosive and the primer. You can carry those normally. Honestly speaking, that explosive is more important than the LAMs."

After camouflaging himself with grass and leaves, Itami began climbing the Tyuba mountains. He had even painted his face in green and brown camouflage paint, while all the metallic parts on his weapon were wrapped up to prevent them from making noise when they bumped into something. While he did not know much about the daily life of the Flame Dragon, it was a wild beast, so it should have keen senses. It would be best to take the appropriate steps against it.

After that, Itami carried the sleeping Tuka on his back.

"Father, I'm scared. Something's coming," Tuka said.

Because she seemed completely terrified, Lelei put her to sleep.

However, Tuka was quite obvious in her usual clothes, so Itami draped her in his bulletproof vest. It served to camouflage her, and the titanium alloy trauma plates would protect her from danger. Then again, it was questionable how useful it would be against a Flame Dragon attack.

Behind him was Rory, Lelei and the nine Dark Elves following them. All of them camouflaged themselves, like Itami did.

“Ugh, this smells gross.”

Crow pinched his nose as he grumbled. Yao replied, “Itami-dono told us to do this, so it can’t be helped.”

That was why everyone slathered all the exposed parts of their body in animal oils.

“I know this is supposed to hide our scent, but won’t the smell just make us more obvious?” Nokk said as he climbed.

There were no trails on this mountain and the terrain was rough. The HMY could not drive through here, so they had to go on foot. They kept low as they moved, until they were almost rubbing against the ground, and they moved through trenches, depressions, and the shadows of big trees. They changed camouflage to match their current terrain and camped at night, only moving the next morning.

Slow as walking might be, they would reach their objective eventually if they just kept moving forward.

On the evening of the third day, they finally reached the slopes of Mt. Tyuba. The smell of sulphur hung heavy in the air, negating their scent camouflage.

Everyone changed into a sand and rock-type camouflage pattern. Itami blackened the mud that he and Tuka used to camouflage their hands and feet, in order to hide the obvious green color.

Itami ordered everyone to go prone, and then signalled with his hands for Crow to come to the head of the group. Crow had been here before, so he would be their guide.

“What’s wrong?” Crow squatted beside Itami.

“Does the Flame Dragon enter from that crater?”

“Yes. Its nest is on one of the outcroppings protruding from the side of the volcano’s mouth,” Crow explained.

He had come to this place before to gather the sulphur found near the volcano. When burned, the smoke from the sulphur would preserve dried fruits for a longer time, and it would look fresher as well.

Although he had only come to gather sulphur, he chanced upon a cave during his searches. That cave led to an outcropping on the interior of the volcano, where the Flame Dragon lay sleeping.

“I had a bad feeling when I saw it, so I ran.”

Itami questioned Crow about the interior of the volcano, particularly the condition of the air within.

According to Crow, the volcano’s mouth was apparently bottomless, so he did not know anything about what lay below. However, the interior was well-ventilated due to the cave leading to the outside, and unlike the exterior, which reeked of sulphur, the air quality inside was very good.

“So the Flame Dragon’s nest is inside the cave?”

Rory seemed quite shocked when she heard it, but she quickly shut her mouth.

“No, it’s inside the volcano’s mouth. The cave simply connects the outside to the inside.”

“Then, what if we descended from the summit of the volcano?”

“Not possible. The interior of the volcano’s mouth is a sheer cliff. I don’t think we could climb down from up there.”

Rory frowned, because she could not go under the earth. Itami smiled and said, “Don’t worry.”

“That’s fine, Rory can stay outside. All we’re doing is checking if the Flame Dragon is in. If it comes back, she can contact us.”

According to the plan, they would enter the cave and check if the Flame Dragon was there. If it was gone, they would plant the explosives, and if it was in, they would immediately fall back and wait for it to leave. If things went well, Rory would not need to do anything.

“Shouldn’t we stop it from leaving?”

“Mm. We don’t want to make it suspicious. We’ll hide and wait for it to leave first.”

Itami muttered, “Does Rory know how to use this?” as he fiddled with his earpiece and headset mike. Rory hurriedly pulled her mike to her mouth and Itami tested the wireless connection to Lelei and Rory.

“We’re going in.”

Itami let Tuka down. His plan was to go in with a rifle. Just as he was about to do it, however, Yao and the other Dark Elves urged him to stay.

“Let us handle these trivial tasks.”

Itami was only too glad to let Yao and Crow go in instead of himself.

It took a while before Yao and Crow got back, and Itami directed the others to take a rest, while they had a dinner of dried travel rations. The smell of food would be covered up by the smell of sulphur, but that same smell made it difficult to work up an appetite.

Still, considering what would happen soon, they did not know when they might next get the chance to eat. Fortunately, everyone understood this, and they ate with gusto regardless of their current location.

Lelei and Rory each took out a set of JSDF Type II Combat Rations (beef curry / tuna salad / pickled vegetables / rice) as well as just-add-water heating packs. The Dark Elves had dried fish from the valley, dried fruits, beans and the like, but they were fascinated by Rory and Lelei’s processed foods. They were quite surprised with how the heating packs immediately produced steam when water was added.

Tuka quietly slept by the side of the group.

Itami had been carrying her all this while, but she was so light that he hardly felt fatigued. That said, the tension was tiring him out. Since he didn’t feel too hungry, he ate slowly.

“You should let Tuka eat too, otherwise she’ll cry when she wakes up.”

“Oh well, what can we do?”

Lelei said that as she took a spoonful of curry.

Just then, Yao and Crow returned.

“What’s it like?”

“Mm, the cave and the volcano shaft are connected, and there’s a nest on an outcropping of rock. The Dragon’s not in, it must have gone.”

“Excellent.”

After hearing Yao's report, Itami picked up Tuka.

At last, they were going into the cave. Everyone tensed up, knowing that they were going into enemy territory. They even spoke more quietly.

"Then, Rory, we're counting on you."

"All right, I'll keep a lookout near the volcano's mouth."

Rory tapped her mike. "Is this thing on?"

"Reading you loud and clear. Ah, screw the comms protocols. Okay, I hear you."

They bid farewell to Rory at the entrance to the cave.

Clutching her halberd tightly, Rory vanished up the side of the brick-red mountain with nimble steps, while Itami and friends headed into the cave after they parted ways with her.

The interior of the cave was so large they thought that they must have been dreaming.

Lava flowed, and became solid when it cooled. After that more lava would flow out, and solidify as well. After countless repetitions of this process, the layers of stone looked like a staircase.

The way the layered stone spread out looked like the stairs leading up to a shrine. The walls were not one solid sheet; they looked more like a giant set of curtains. Calling this place a shrine would not be out of the question. It boasted a long corridor, a high viewing platform, and even an altar-like structure. The power of nature was not to be underestimated.

If they brought a holy man here, he might set up a church on the spot.

Itami lit up his surroundings with a flashlight, then left the not-altar behind, and went deeper into the cave.

The Dark Elves lit their surroundings with flaming torches. The echoes made by the close quarters and the flickering shadows made by their light sources contributed to the spooky atmosphere.

"Itami-dono, this way."

Itami could see light coming from ahead of him.

He put Tuka down, and nervously advanced, holding his rifle. Above him, he could see the starry night sky through the mouth of the volcano. The light was coming from the mouth of the volcano.

There was an outcropping here.

Though it was called an outcropping, it was actually quite broad. The caldera of the volcano was about the size of a baseball field, and it was roughly bowl-shaped. In its center, a hole led down to the main shaft, and the outcropping was located here.

The outcropping was roughly the size of two basketball courts, and the way sand and rocks were mixed here resembled the seaside. The Dragon's nest here looked like a formation of stones on a beach.

Crow confirmed that this was the Flame Dragon's lair, and the Flame Dragon had been resting here earlier.

Although they had never seen a Dragon's nest before, this layout was far too simple, and it made them suspicious.

Still, when they stood there, they could believe that the vast thing before them was where their enemy made its lair.

There were fragments of what looked like broken eggshells scattered over the ground, as well as enormous footprints that could only have been made by a Dragon.

“The eggshells are fresh. It looks like the young dragons hatched recently, and that they left the nest right after hatching.”

Lelei’s conclusion after inspecting the fragments put everyone at ease.

There were things which looked like rocks on the sand, but a closer look revealed that they were the remains of what had once been helmets. Nobody knew how long these things had been here, but they also found sparkling weapons like swords and the like, half-buried in the sand.

“And this is?”

Yao picked up the helmet and the sword, feeling them in her hands.

“I think these belonged to the heroes throughout history who came to challenge the Flame Dragon.”

“Well, this is a magic sword, after all.”

Nokk’s eyes were sparkling as he focused on that sword. He breathed, “This would be worth a lot if we brought it back...”

The Dark Elves closed their eyes in silent prayer for the ones who had borne these weapons and armor. The weapons and armor that belonged to those brave enough to bet their lives against the Flame Dragon must have been the work of a master.

“All right, let’s get to work. Lelei, help me look after Tuka. Everyone, help me light up the surroundings.”

After hearing Itami’s instructions, they brought their equipment over.

Itami unpacked what looked like blocks of cheese from the boxes. In total, there were 75 kilograms of it.

“It looks a bit like cheese.” The young Kom was fascinated by the things Itami was unpacking from the boxes. He pinched off a piece to put in his mouth, but Itami smacked it out of his hand.

“This stuff is poisonous. Don’t even lick it.”

Frightened by the mention of poison, Kom immediately put the piece back.

Itami picked up the piece, and brought it near Kom’s torch. The white substance quietly burned as Itami stuck it into the torch’s flame. This unexpectedly peaceful reaction was unlike the common impression one might have of explosives.

“This stuff will only burn if you light it. You need to do some work to make it explode.”

Itami laid a tarpaulin on the ground and put the white substance on it, as though he were a sculptor.

In the movies, when planting C4, the actors would stick electrical detonators into the wrapped explosives, but that would result in an incomplete detonation in real life. In order to fully bring out the plastic explosives’ power, it had to be kneaded well. Without sufficient kneading, the explosives might even fail to detonate.

Itami’s hands turned a pale yellow after kneading the explosive.

It would be far too much to expect one person to knead 75 kilos of C4, so everyone chipped in. In the end, they molded it into bricks.

Itami touched the ground and took out a small device. It was called an electronic detonator.

He touched the ground to discharge his static electricity. This was because enough static electricity could initiate a detonation. By touching the ground, he grounded himself and removed his static electricity charge.

The next part required a lot of specialized knowledge. Only Itami could do it. He took out the cable reel and a pair of pliers, cut off several lengths of wire from the reel, and then began turning them into auxiliary circuits.

He stripped off the cable casing at the end, and then he joined the wires inside onto the contacts of the detonator.

Itami worked in silence, while Yao held a torch above him to provide light.

“Is there anything we can help with?”

“Yes. Dig a pit in the Dragon’s nest. About this deep.”

After receiving their instructions, Ban, Fen and Nokk started digging.

Itami’s forehead was slick with sweat, but he produced good work, without any mistakes. He spliced the lengths of cable, and then joined them to the final detonation circuit.

Usually, only engineers would study these techniques of rigging explosives. However, they were part of the basic curriculum within SFG, and Itami had learned them. He was hardly a diligent student, but much like it was in school, he felt that “failing at your tasks means failing at life”. His determination helped him to master this skill, and this determination was now a part of him.

Suddenly, he recalled the memories of his instructors cursing him out and knuckling him on the head.

Itami stopped his work, gently put down the detonators, and pressed his mike’s switch.

“Rory, can you hear me?”

He called Rory several times, but there was no response. Perhaps the wireless signal could not penetrate the thick rock. If that was the case, there was no point in making her a sentry.

Damn. Still, they were close to completion. Might as well finish it up in one go.

“Cheh, this is going to be a pain... Everyone, eyes to the sky. Lelei, the reception here seems pretty bad. Try and raise Rory.”

After saying that, Itami went back to work.

Then he turned off his mike’s switch and took off his headset. Electronic switches could cause sparks, and he broke out in a cold sweat as he realised he had been handling the explosives and detonators with the headset on.

What would the others think if they knew how close he had come to blowing them up? He looked around to gauge the others’ reactions.

Fortunately, nobody seemed to get Itami’s meaning. They simply went “huh?” in confusion.

After that it was time to set the processed explosive.

He stacked the blocks of C4 into the hole Ban had made, layering them on top of each other. Then, he plugged the detonators into the bricks. Then he carefully unrolled the cable from the reel, so as not to tangle the detonation cord in anything.

“Give me that sword over there.”

“?”

Yao and the others tilted their heads as they watched Itami place the magic sword on top of the explosives.

When terrorists used plastic explosives, they would often sprinkle them with screws in order to increase their killing power. The fact was that a normal explosive was not as powerful as people thought it was. The fragments caused by the shockwave of the explosion were what caused a lot of collateral damage. They were layering the magic swords and other masterwork weapons on the explosives for the same reason. If it worked, the swords of the warriors who failed in their quest would wound the Dragon, earning their departed masters a small measure of peace.

The explosives were covered in a thin layer of sand and dirt, and another layer erased their footprints. They paid out the wire from the reel and headed back to the cave from the outcropping. Of course, the wire could not be exposed, so it had to be shallowly buried.

Finally, they joined the wire to the detonation trigger.

And so, the preparations for the demolition were complete. What Itami thought had only taken a while had actually taken close to five hours, which shocked him when he checked his watch.

His shoulders and waist ached from all the squatting he did. He took a deep breath and said, “Okay, job’s done.” However, when he looked around, everyone was frozen stiff.

“What’s wrong?”

He wiped the sweat off his head and looked behind, and the Flame Dragon loomed before him.

Rory was assigned to look out for the Flame Dragon near the volcano’s crater. However, she wound up looking at the sky full of stars once the sun set.

Not long after, she spotted a Flame Dragon in the night sky. It was flying close to here.

Since they had a plan, the plan had to be followed. Rory hid herself so that the Flame Dragon would not spot her and she tried to warn Itami about the Flame Dragon. However, there was no response.

“Mm? Is this really all right? What if I didn’t get through?”

A chill ran down Rory’s spine.

Come to think of it, Itami was also responsible for this. Most of the time, he spoke the same language as Rory, so eventually he began treating her like a Japanese person. For a Japanese person using the wireless handsets, if the reception was poor, the accepted practice would be to move to a place with better reception, such as a window. Perhaps the only place for people on the top and bottom of a volcano’s mouth to communicate would be at the lip of the volcano’s crater. However, Rory ran toward the cave in order to get closer to Itami. Doing that increased the thickness of rock the signal would have to go through, which only worsened things.

“Oi, answer me!”

Rory desperately shouted for Itami. However, the Flame Dragon neared the volcano’s mouth, and it descended into the volcano..

If this went on, the Flame Dragon would attack the defenseless Itami and the others. What should she do?

It was pointless to stay on the outside. Rory decided to try and directly warn Itami of the impending danger, and so she quickened her pace and ran toward the cave entrance.

However—

“.....No way!”

Rory was shocked speechless by the sight before her.

Itami locked eyes with the Flame Dragon, its wings spread.

The unexpected encounter froze Itami and his friends in their tracks. The Flame Dragon had not expected humans to show up in its nest, and stared in shock at these uninvited guests.

It felt as though they could feel the heat of each other’s breath. But in truth, both sides were not that close to each other. It was a purely psychological effect.

Itami slowly, slowly backed up, nervously reaching for his pistol in its thigh holster. Itami knew that he might as well be waving a toy gun around in front of a Dragon, but he had placed his rifle elsewhere while he was working.

The place was so quiet that he could even hear someone else gulping. If they moved, they would die. As the old saying went, at that moment everyone thought the same thing and they stayed still.

Nobody knew how much time has passed. It might have been an instant or it might have been an eternity. If a second had 75 instants, then including the time spent on each breath, when one reckoned it as instants, it would have been a tremendous number.

Kom did not know how long this would last, but he was unable to bear the way both sides were staring each other down. He screamed like a madman and lifted up his LAM.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

By that signal, the silence was broken by clamor.

Itami ran.

Lelei dragged Tuka back to the cave to protect her.

At the same time, Yao ran to protect Tuka.

After that, the Dark Elves and Kom raised their LAMs.

The boy fired his LAM, at such short range that he could not possibly miss. After the brief ignition of the rocket engine, the anti-tank warhead struck home on the Dragon’s throat and exploded, flooding the crater with blinding light and clouds of thick smoke.

“Got him!”

Suddenly, the Flame Dragon and its right claw emerged from the smoke, aborting their short-lived joy. The boy's body was torn in half in a swipe, and his upper torso flew into the distance.

What splattered on the wall was no longer recognizable as an Elf.

Worse, when Kom fired his LAM, there had been people behind him, who were severely injured by the backblast of the weapon. Ban and Nayu died instantly, their bodies shredded by the counterblast ejected by the LAM at point-blank range.

The people slightly further away were also affected, and they collapsed on the ground. This was good news for them, however. The Flame Dragon's tail sweep should have hit everyone, but the fallen people were not hit. Only Kom's lower body was smashed away.

The Flame Dragon roared, shaking the interior of the volcano's mouth.

The Dark Elves stood up again, shouldering their LAMs. They had forgotten everything Itami taught them amidst the dragon's thunderous roar.

Nokk did not flip his safety from S to F. In his panic, all he did was blindly mash the trigger.

Crow remembered to turn off the safety, but he forgot to pull out the probe, and his attack was not effective. In order to achieve the Neumann effect and breach the Flame Dragon's tank-like scales, the probe had to be pulled out. In addition, the detonation of the warhead at short range would not only injure himself, but his teammates as well.

“The probe! Pull out the probe!”

Nobody heard Itami's voice through the Dragon's roar and the explosions. Lelei dragged Tuka to the cave, while Yao noticed Itami and shouted, “Get to the cave!”

Itami ignored Yao and grabbed the LAM she was holding.

At this moment, a Dark Elf died, and soon another one followed.

Nokk was chewed through by the Flame Dragon's sharp fangs, while Meto was pulverized by a swipe of its paw.

Of course, the Flame Dragon was not unhurt. The explosion of the LAM caused it intense pain, but sadly that was all it did.

Then the Flame Dragon breathed fire at the people who were desperately fleeing it, planning to wipe them all out.

The reason why normal attacks could not deal a lethal blow to a Flame Dragon was not just because its scales were sturdy and tough, but also because they overlapped each other. This gap between the scales and the body was like spaced armor on tanks, which cushioned impacts.

To the Flame Dragon, this bunch of hateful little creatures were cradling black staves, which created a tremendous impact which stunned, but they were nowhere as potent as the power which destroyed its left arm.

Its shock lasted only a second, and then the Flame Dragon determined that this object was no threat to it. What it wanted to do was to chase away the maggots infesting its nest.

Itami pulled the probe out, twisted it in the direction of the arrow, and then locked it in place.

He raised it on his shoulder, and held his breath as he aimed.

He swivelled the safety from S to F.

And just as he was aiming the LAM, Seimy was thrown into Itami.

He fell to the ground, cushioning Seimy's fall. Itami could not rise for a time, having taken the full impact straight on. Seimy was slightly hurt, and she reached for the dropped LAM.

"Idiot, don't shoot!"

Itami was right behind her and he ran as fast as he could. In what might have been a stroke of luck, the fired LAM warhead struck true on the Flame Dragon's leg.

Shortly after, the Flame Dragon's howl of agony rang through the volcano.

The missile's explosively forged projectile warhead pierced the Dragon's scales — whose hardness was over 9 on the Mohs scale — and ripped into the Flame Dragon's thigh.

Mangled scales and flesh flew everywhere, and the Flame Dragon thrashed in pain.

"Tuka, wake up."

The girl's comfortable rest was interrupted by her father's voice.

"Father, what happened?"

Tuka rubbed her eyes as she woke up.

She looked around, and found that she was in her home, which filled her with nostalgia. Radiant sunlight flowed into the room from the windows, and she felt that today would be another peaceful day.

Her father's voice also warmed her heart. Her head was still a bit fuzzy, but her father's gentle voice made her feel happy. As she remembered the terrible nightmares she had earlier, her happiness grew deeper.

The sounds of footsteps came from outside the window, as well as the sounds of shouting and explosions. However, that seemed like it was happening in a faraway world. Right now, all she wanted was to enjoy her conversation with her father.

"Father, what's wrong?"

She looked around, but she could no longer see her father. Instead, she saw the Flame Dragon chewing through the body of a young girl in an instant.

"Yuno!"

Her best friend, so close as to be family, was devoured in an instant. Tuka did not know when she had picked up a bow, but she made her decision in an instant, nocked an arrow onto the bowstring, pulled it taut with all her strength, then aimed and loosed. But sadly, her arrow was knocked aside.

She was not the only one firing arrows. The Elf warriors around here loosed an endless hail of arrows at the gigantic Dragon. They exploded when they hit, but thanks to the robust protection of its scales, the Dragon was unharmed.

The female Dark Elf Seimy was chewed to pieces by the Dragon, and the Flame Dragon's roving eye lighted on Tuka, selecting her as its next prey.

As the Flame Dragon looked right at her, Tuka's entire body shivered in terror.

She wanted to run, but her feet would not move. She wanted to scream, but her voice was gone.

At this moment, Tuka froze, as though her soul had been stolen away. Or rather, it was more that she wanted to flee, but her mind had not gotten the message. Why had she challenged this monster? She must have made a mistake. Even if she directed her hatred and anger at this monster, she would have no chance of victory. Thus, Tuka cursed her foolishness.

"Tuka, run!"

Her father protected the stunned Tuka.

"You just need to hide here, listen to me!"

And then, Tuka was dragged into the cave by Lelei and Yao.

In the instant before she entered the cave, she saw the form of the man who had replaced her father, snatched away by the Flame Dragon — she saw him die for her, and the sight of her father being eaten by the Flame Dragon.

She desperately reached for him, but touched nothing.

Her father's shape drifted away and away, further and further away.

Father died for me.

It's all my fault. It's all my fault. It's all my, It's all—

"You're wrong."

Lelei's voice spoke into Tuka's ear.

"You did not kill your father. The Flame Dragon did."

"But—"

"Itami got it wrong. For someone like you who could live for so long, wounds of the heart would be trivial matters. After ten, a hundred years, your soul would heal. All you had to do was wait until your self-loathing faded away. Therefore, there was no need for him to save you. Only humans, with their short lifespan, are driven to solve every problem they encounter. It is how they live."

Tuka carefully considered the words Lelei said.

It would seem she was just griping. Lelei let out a series of sighs, and then looked straight at Tuka.

"You decided on your own that you could not defeat the Flame Dragon, so you turned your anger at a far more accessible target — yourself."

“But, we can’t beat it... or can we?”

“If a member of one’s family is killed by a thief, then one should hate the thief. But people will misaim their hatred — why should they go to where the thief hides? If one loses a family member to sickness, then one should hate the disease. It is not the doctor’s fault; yet people will hate the doctor.”

“Then what should I curse? Who should I vent my anger at? In the end, it all comes back to me!”

Just as Tuka was shouting, the female Dark Elf blasted through the Flame Dragon’s thigh.

The shockwave of the explosion and fragments swept past Lelei’s face. She slumped like she had been slapped.

“All right! We did it!”

The survivors, Crow, Fen and Yao were breathing hard, and their bodies were stained with fresh blood. Carrying their LAMs, they forgot their fear in the midst of their excitement. Each of them was hurt in different ways.

“This is the turning point between success and failure. You just need to—”

Lelei raised her head. A rill of blood streamed down from her forehead.

“I’ll take down that Dragon. You just need to keep it still.”

Lelei rose, holding her staff. She began incanting what was known as the one-man chorus, and began the “Initiation”.

Lelei’s hometown had been destroyed by the Dragon, and many of the people she knew had been killed by it.

“Abru-main!”

As Tuka watched Lelei rushing forward, she finally realized that what was happening before her eyes was not a dream, nor a fantasy, but reality.

“Rihommun!!”

Lelei levitated a sword with her magic, and launched it.

The sword flew like an arrow, but its sharpness alone could not pierce the sturdy scales. With a hollow clang, the sword bounced away. Accelerating it with magic did not work. It was futile.

Its leg was hurt, and the Dragon, helpless before this onslaught, sought to escape the LAM’s explosion. In the process it bashed into the cliff below the volcano’s mouth. After it regained its balance, it spread its wings.

The Dark Elves were delighted by the turning of the tide. They grinned as they saw the Flame Dragon cowering in fear of the LAM.

“We can do it!” Crow shouted, but there were almost no more LAMs left.

Fen picked up the LAM under Nayu’s body, pulled out the probe, and shouldered it. The process took only a few seconds, but the Flame Dragon would not miss this chance. Ignoring the fact that it would be attacking its own nest, it breathed a sustained stream of flame at Fen, who turned into a walking pyre.

The burning Fen ran toward the Flame Dragon, and then at point blank range, he pulled the trigger.

The Flame Dragon took its second wound from Fen's dying attack.

Lelei thought — how could she accelerate the swords until she could pierce the Dragon's scales?

Then, she remembered how Itami had placed the swords on top of the C4. Indeed, using the force of the explosion would be enough.

Lelei picked up a sword and a tiny series of rings surrounded the sword's hilt.

She launched the sword with magic, and when it touched the Flame Dragon, she detonated the rings. The explosion of the rings drove it deep into the Flame Dragon's belly.

To the Flame Dragon, preparing to swipe at Yao, this was a mere flesh wound. For something its size, being pierced by a sword was like being pricked by a thorn. It hardly hurt.

However, pain aside, the sword had pierced its scales. It was an intolerable blow to the Dragon's pride. Its heretofore invulnerable armor was no longer an absolute defense. The Flame Dragon turned its gaze to Lelei, and then to the tiny prick on its body. A look of disbelief spread over its face as it parsed this inconceivable event.

A roar that sounded more like a wail rang past Lelei, and she smiled darkly.

"Fufufufufufufufufu, die, you shitty lizard!"

Lelei levitated all the swords in the area — the rusted sword, the ruined sword, the magic sword, the nameless sword, the gem-encrusted sword, the greatsword, the razor-sharp sword, the divine sword, the barbarian sword, over ten, no, more than twenty of them.

The spirits of the countless warriors who had challenged the Flame Dragon and died in despair now inhabited their weapons. And now, they floated above the Flame Dragon's head, moved by Lelei's full power.

Chapter 16

“Ooh...”

Itami rubbed his forehead as he shook his head, his vision slowly returning to him.

The ground, which should have remained still, seemed to be spinning back and forth. Had he fallen down? Or did something knock him down? He did not know. After being hit by Seimy and her LAM's backblast, the semicircular canals in his ears were disturbed, and his sense of balance was disrupted.

Every part of his body that had sweat on it was stained with dirt, and combined with the thick black exhaust smoke of the LAM, Itami looked like a filthy mudman. The grit had even gotten into his mouth, and the feeling of the dust filling the gaps in his mouth was disgusting.

He tried to gather up saliva and spat several times to clear his mouth. After that, while he felt some spit on his face, he remembered how he had been knocked down.

How long had passed? An instant? Several seconds? Or a few minutes?

The world spun before his eyes, and as Itami waited for his dizziness to fade, he looked around.

Right now, Seimy's face was within arm's reach, and her eyes were staring at Itami. The fact that her eyes were so close and so still startled Itami. What had happened to her? Then, as Itami's line of sight drifted down her beautiful, over her slender neck and her ample, generously proportioned breasts, he understood.

Seimy was a corpse.

Although she was chewed to pieces by the Flame Dragon, she was not gulped and swallowed down. The seductive Seimy was reduced to this state in the span of a few seconds, which struck Itami as unnatural. This girl would never move again. Her motionless body would not think, nor would it speak. It was but a carcass. Itami slowly reached his hand out to touch her face.

Her body was still soft, and there were traces of heat in her flesh. Her face was untouched. When he closed her eyes, she looked like she was sleeping. However, after looking down at the unimaginable reality below her breasts, at the crimson ruin of her waist and the nothing that was left of the rest of her body, Itami finally realised that she would never wake up again.

Suddenly, there was an explosion, and a wave of heat carried a hail of fragments down on Itami.

He hurriedly grabbed his head. Although he had small cuts all over his body, he could not pinpoint which of his many bruises or burns filled his body with agony. The shock wave that came with the heat and the fragments battered his entire body. It would not be a surprise if that impact dealt heavy damage to him.

This was when Itami keenly realised that his battle with the Flame Dragon was just beginning, and it would keep going on.

It was said that when a man was decapitated, he would still be conscious in the brief period before his brain cells died. If that was true, then Itami was the last thing Seimy saw as her world faded to black.

If that was the case, what was she thinking as she looked at Itami?

“I have to go.”

Itami patted Seimy's head in farewell, and then his conviction spurred his body into motion as he crawled forward.

He realised that his helmet was gone. Because the chin strap was old and frayed, it broke when the helmet was subjected to a light impact and the helmet flew off. Should he be glad that his head was still intact, or sad that his helmet had failed him?

Grabbing his head as he dodged the flying fragments, the shockwaves of the explosions, and the Flame Dragon's gouts of searing fire, Itami looked around, feeling for the detonation trigger.

Before long, he found it buried under some dust and sand.

Itami reached out for it, but it did not feel like a detonation trigger at all, and he clicked his tongue.

The detonation wire had been severed. Was it because of the LAM's explosion, or the flying fragments? Nobody knew.

"Dammit!"

His hard work was all wasted.

If they could not use the explosives, then they had to bet everything on the LAMs. However, the Dark Elves had sacrificed themselves in a wild, uncoordinated charge. The only Dark Elves left were Crow, Fen and Yao. And the three of them were worn out. They were covered in blood and cuts, and black scorch marks all over them which might have been caused by the Flame Dragon's breath or the LAM's backblast.

Yao grabbed a LAM from Ban's corpse and charged the Flame Dragon. She faithfully followed Itami's instructions. She pulled out the probe and set the safety to F. If it hit, it would blow the Dragon's scales to gory chunks.

The maddened Flame Dragon threw itself against the rock walls, jumping around as though to escape the LAM's rockets. Every time its vast body smashed into the ground and stone, the outcropping of stone shook violently, and rocks from the walls rained down on everyone, accompanied by an avalanche of volcanic ash, gravel and bedrock.

Just then, Fen was consumed by the Flame Dragon's breath, and with his dying attack, he scored a telling blow on the Flame Dragon.

Itami rose, saying "You idiot!" as he did.

In just a short while, the Dark Elves had accrued a startling number of casualties. Seimy was dead, and now Fen was dead. If he hesitated for even a single moment, the next ones might be Lelei, Tuka, Yao and Crow. The instant he thought that, Itami blurred into action. Perhaps it was some grand resolve, or his conviction, but whatever the case, it was moving him. He did not imagine anything, his mind was blank and the only thing he did was the reflexive actions drilled into him during his training. Itami launched himself out, grabbed the detonation trigger, the reel of detonation cord, and he had the pliers in his mouth.

He ran beneath the Flame Dragon's feet, felt for the buried detonation bus, and began excavating the ground.

A mere clash of blades was not a battle. A mere exchange of gun and cannon fire was not a battle either. Digging, conveying orders, setting explosives, every task had its place, and every order relayed had to be faithfully executed. That was the whole of a battle.

Itami's order to himself was to ensure their final trump card against the Flame Dragon was usable.

He found the severed ends of the wire, stripped them, then spliced them together.

It sounded simple, but the Flame Dragon was tramping about above him, spewing flames from its bloody maw, and the shockwaves from the LAM explosions rocked the area.

The Dragon cried out as though it were wailing in pain.

It spread both its wings to leave the outcropping — at last, it was going to flee.

The dust and sand falling on Itami's head made him cough uncontrollably. He grabbed the reel and paid out the newly-repaired detonation cord. Just then, somebody laughed with mocking shrillness.

[illegible]

He glanced behind — it was Lelei.

Her robe-like vestments blew in an invisible wind, and her emerald eyes glowed with power.

Her slender arms projected forth from her body, and her outstretched hands reached to the sky. Her fingers pointed forward, and there Itami saw countless swords floating in the air as if they had been hung there, their numbers blotting out the starry sky beyond them.

“Die, you shitty lizard!”

With her uncharacteristic crudity as the signal, the swords fell like rain.

Itami suddenly realised that being caught in this sword rain was no joke, and he swiftly fled. Yao and Crow realized the danger as well, and panicked.

“Fufufu...”

Lelei's personality seemed to have changed all of a sudden.

The usually calm and emotionless Lelei, like a sheet of white paper, was now vividly dyed by assorted emotions.

“Wah! Waitwaitwaitwaitwait!”

Itami grabbed his head and threw himself down onto the ground. Yao and Crow followed him to the dirt, their foreheads almost touching.

They gritted their teeth and waited for the swords to fall. However, the impact they created was not as powerful as they thought it would be.

The floating swords were not simply drawn down by gravity. From the way they were launched, they were clearly aimed at the Dragon's eyes. They flew to their objective with precision targeting. The swords encircled the Dragon from all sides and cut off the Dragon's escape, and then the explosions began.

The impulse of the explosions launched the swords forward. Many of them were blown to pieces, and many others bounced off, having lost their sharpness. Of course, some of them pierced the Dragon's tough scales. But from the looks of things, that was only a small fraction of them. At an estimate, 10% of them struck home? Or 5%? From this, one could see how many merchants had betrayed the heroes who placed their trust in these swords.

However, Lelei controlled many swords.

Perhaps only a small fraction of the swords struck home, but even a fraction of a large number was still an impressive amount.

The swords made by legendary smiths pierced into the Flame Dragon's body. In addition, Lelei's attack also targeted the wings of the Flame Dragon as it tried to flee. Both wings were shredded into tatters and lost the power to lift its vast body, and so it fell.

That vast body struck the outcropping.

It did so with an incredible impact.

The outcropping lurched violently, and cracks spread through the bedrock. The Flame Dragon was as badly hurt as the stone it fell on, and it thrashed in agony. Its wings could not bear it aloft, and the numerous wounds all over its body leaked blood. Impaled by dozens of swords, spears and blades, it did not have the strength to stand up.

It did not even have the strength to moan in pain.

"We did it!"

Yao and Crow were elated as they saw the Flame Dragon sprawled on the ground like a beaten dog. They each drew their sabers. However, even if it could not fly, it still had offensive and defensive power on par with a tank. As Itami saw their charge, he saw that it was still dangerous.

"Idiots! Stop!"

Itami managed to grab Yao by the hair, but Crow did not stop. In addition, Lelei collapsed in exhaustion before him. Itami's hands were full holding onto Yao and helping Lelei up.

Crow drew his sword, and looking straight ahead, he swung at the Flame Dragon with all his strength.

As the blade bounced off with a ringing metallic sound, Crow realised the unnatural toughness of the Dragon's scales, but the thrill of striking the Dragon with his sword consumed him, and he launched blow after blow at it.

"You bastard! You bastard!"

Crow seemed to have forgotten everything else as he swung his sword, and when he realized it wasn't working, he stabbed with the point. He drove his blade through the gaps between the scales. He planned to work his blade and cut out its scales.

However, even on the brink of death, a Flame Dragon was still a Flame Dragon.

It raised its head and looked at its shifting body, and at the same time it exhaled a gout of fire over the irritating gnat picking at it, and Crow burst into flame.

"Uwaahhhh!"

"Crow!" Yao shouted and reached her hand out to him, but Itami held onto her for dear life.

"Don't go, Yao! Don't do it!"

"Crow! Itami-dono, let me go!"

"Don't do it, you'll get caught in it as well!"

Yao's shouts were futile, and Crow went from a rolling fireball on the ground to a lifeless corpse.

The Flame Dragon's eyes were filled with bloodlust. It exhaled brief spurts of flame as it intimidated Itami and the others. Its eyes were filled with the dogged determination to live that any Ancient Dragon would have.

"Why! Why did you stop me?!"

"You stupid bitch, get a fucking grip and calm the fuck down!"

Itami could not let go of the agitated Yao. His plan was to back away from the Flame Dragon that might breathe fire at any time and into the cave, and he kept pulling on Yao's hand as he went.

"Ah, aaah, aahhhhh!"

"Just bite your nails and watch from the side," Lelei said mockingly. Tuka could only sit there in silence and watch the battle play out before her.

The Dark Elf died in the fire.

Yao reached her hand out to help her comrade, but Itami held onto her and did not let go. He was steadfastly determined to drag her away from the Flame Dragon. Yao, filled with bloodlust, kept resisting Itami's pull. She kept trying to break free from him and run at the Flame Dragon.

At that moment, she saw her body superimposed over Yao's.

I'm an idiot, I'm an idiot, I'm an idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idiotidiotidiotidiotidiotidiot.

The Flame Dragon before her shook its body slightly and bared its fangs at Itami. Itami's back was to the Dragon as he scooped up Lelei and yanked at Yao's hand.

The Flame Dragon lowered its jaw, revealing its razor-sharp fangs.

Lelei saw the image of her father over that of Itami, his back to the Dragon.

"Father... is dead."

And in this moment, that thought filled Tuka's mind.

She clenched her teeth, and stepped forward.

She had no sword or bow in hand. Most Elves would be defenseless in this state.

Tuka went forward with her bare hands.

Forest Elves lived in the woods, and they had an affinity for wind and wood-elemental magic. And of course, Tuka was a High Elf, and she only needed two verses to incant her magic.

"Teruymmun! Hapuriy!"

This was spirit magic that summoned lightning.

Goooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!

A tear ran down from Tuka's sea-blue eyes, and she finished the incantation for her lightning spell.

Of course, Tuka's lightning attack would not be fatal to the Flame Dragon. Perhaps if her father or many Elves in unison cast that spell, it might have felled the Dragon.

However, that was enough. That was enough to get the Flame Dragon's attention. Even if it was just for a fleeting moment, a fraction of a second, an instant, a blink of an eye, it was enough for the man whose body overlapped with the image of her father to get away, to flee the gaping maw and save himself.

Blue-white lightning flashed through the air, and the earth trembled.

As the lightning struck, Itami grabbed Lelei and pulled Yao toward Tuka. And then, Tuka received them with both arms. In this way, Itami brought Lelei, Tuka and Yao into the cave. This time, Tuka was not alone; she was with everyone, and together they went for the safety of the cave.

As the electricity struck the Dragon's body, the current which should have flowed harmlessly along the Dragon's body and into the ground was instead conducted into its body by the swords protruding from it.

Electricity followed the path of least resistance when it travelled, and so it stabbed into the Dragon's body. After that, Itami armed and fired the detonation trigger. The electronic impulse raced down the freshly-repaired detonation cord and into the countless detonators stuck into the 75 kilograms of C4 plastic explosive buried within the earth.

The Flame Dragon's heart pounded.

And then —

The Flame Dragon howled mournfully, its death throes exploding into the air like the rending of a slab of metal. And then, after the wail, it was the earth's turn to explode, making people think the volcano had erupted. The wall of sound echoed through the cave and the earth shuddered. The shockwave blasted through the ears of Itami on the ground and the standing Tuka. For everyone, it felt as though their very souls had been blasted to bits by the explosion.

The Flame Dragon's vast body was torn asunder by the destructive power of the C4.

The blood that spurted from its cardiac arteries burst into flame as it contacted the air.

Every beat of the Flame Dragon's heart spurted more blood from its arteries, and in place of the red liquid that should have flowed through its body, tongues of flame flew into the air. The blood that splattered everywhere began to burn, and soon its body was consumed in flame.

The sturdy dragon scales had been blasted apart and the inside of its body was a furnace. At this stage, there was no saving the beast. The Flame Dragon shuddered and trembled, trails of crimson flame spraying out of the injuries in its body and setting the whole place on fire. As it struggled in agony, the outcropping finally collapsed, and it fell into the endless darkness below.

And then, with that, the whole world started to come apart.

The cave's roof began to collapse, as though it was a mineshaft whose supports had been knocked out. Cracks spread through the ground and grew larger, finally becoming a yawning crevasse. It seemed as though the four of them would be dragged down to hell.

“Run!”

Itami slapped Yao’s face, then picked up the immobile Lelei and urged Tuka on.

Tuka’s body had been battered by the tremendous impact and she hurt all over, but she had no time to complain about that. “Run! Run! Run!” Itami shouted, and Tuka broke into a sprint.

The cave roof, the stalactites, the floor, cracks appeared everywhere and they began to collapse.

The earthquake did not stop. Instead, it seemed to be getting stronger. If this kept up, the entire world might break apart.

The cave’s interior, where the steps seemed like the inside of a temple, began to collapse behind Itami’s band as they ran past.

The debris that fell was swallowed by the yawning void below them.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

The bolt of fear that lanced through Tuka as the ground underneath her disappeared into the Abyss made her scream.

“Tuka!”

Itami grabbed Tuka’s left hand with his right. He desperately pulled her up, trying to keep her from falling.

“Hold on!”



Itami was thinking of hauling her up when Yao suddenly reached her hand out and supported her body. Both their hands gripped Tuka's firmly.

Countless cracks appeared around them, all of which led to the earth.

The sturdy, hard floor beneath them sudden felt like sandy stone. The rock pillars collapsed. All the pillars holding the cave up snapped and broke.

It was dangerous here, it was dangerous there, and there was hardly a safe place in sight.

Itami held tightly onto Tuka's hand and ran through the collapsing cave.

The group ran desperately forward, as the floor behind them collapsed just a hair's breadth behind every step they took. It felt as if the collapsing cave was pursuing them in order to swallow them into the depths of the earth.

The fear of the collapse and the fatigue of the full sprint drained Tuka's strength without remorse.

Her flowing long hair was stained with dirt and blackened by smoke. Sand and debris stuck to her skin with her sweat as the mortar, and she looked like she had rolled around in a mud puddle.

Her heart pounded like a clock tower striking twelve, and her chest felt like it would break. Every breath she took burned and filled her with pain and misery.

A rock fell from the mouth of the cave. The word "catastrophic collapse" would be appropriate here — everything was falling. However, some people survived — they had cheated death.

She was alive.

Itami was alive.

Lelei was alive.

Yao was alive.

Tuka gripped Itami's hand and savored the reality — that she had not died, and that she had avenged her father.

Before she knew it, they had made it outside, and her strength returned.

The group emerged from the collapsing cavern with their lives. As they made contact with the outside air, Itami's group collapsed like puppets whose strings had been cut.

Their shoulders heaved as they took deep breaths, and then coughed uncontrollably.

They had breathed in the searing air, and it burned their lungs. Their limbs were as dull and heavy as lead, and Itami was angry and depressed at his pitiful state.

The area around the cave entrance was covered in debris, and the dust in the air settled slowly.

The western side of the sky still sparkled with stars, but the east was stained a dreamlike red.

"Haa, haa, haa... is everyone alright?"

Itami's question was simple. Tuka replied, "I'm alive", Yao said, "Somehow" and Lelei replied, "No significant injuries".

"You sure took your time," Rory said in a voice that was more of a whisper.

It looked like everyone was safe, but come to think about it, everyone was covered in wounds, so calling this "safe" did not seem very appropriate. In any case, after Itami confirmed that everyone was back, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"..."

After a brief silence, Itami suddenly noticed something.

"Rory!"

Itami raised his head, he saw a ragged doll, fallen on the ground, clad in shredded black Goth clothing sewn with lace.

Her limbs looked like they were about to come apart, and her body was covered in wounds.

There was hardly a spot on her which was intact. A thin white smoke rose from her wounds, like steam hissing off a hot pan, and the wounds healed in an instant. But to a bystander, this healing could not match up to the bleeding and the damage she had taken. The fact that she was still alive was quite surprising.

"What's this? What happened?"

Ignoring everyone else around him, Itami went up to the Loli and cradled her in his arms.

When Rory's arm drooped powerlessly to the ground, he panicked. It would seem her left arm was only attached by a piece of skin.

Amidst his panic, Itami managed to stick her arm back on. It seemed illogical, but this time, it was the right thing to do — the wounds all over her body began to heal.

"Really, onee-sama, to think a human would be worrying about you. It seems you've gotten rusty."

Itami turned around, looking to where the voice had come from.

Further up the slope stood a girl in white priestess' clothing, flanked by two young Dragons.

Chapter 17

The girl wore a set of white Goth clothing.

She looked to be around 20 or so.

Her deep blue skin was covered by lace-edged white cloth. A pair of firm, perky breasts swelled from her chest and pushed against her clothes, and the space from her cleavage to the shiny belly-button piercing was displayed for all to see. The clothes on her torso were held together by lace tapes, which compressed and bound her exposed flesh. The sleeves of her clothes seemed to have been torn off, while the white skirt of her clothing was torn and tattered. Her skirt was designed to show off the full length of her luscious legs. The skin of her belly, her arms, her legs and her face were covered in tribal tattoos. There seemed to be some significance to them; perhaps her whole body was tattooed.

The girl had a head of thick, white-gray hair, and her gold pupils were slit vertically and gleamed with an eerie light. She rested the shaft of an enormous scythe on her shoulders and licked her lips. She resembled a yakuza resting his sword across his shoulders, down to her confident, imposing attitude. When Itami realised the situation he was in, he had the feeling of impending doom — she seemed ready to rush out at any time and kill everyone around her.

“Onee-sama, you’re the bride-to-be of my master, letting a filthy human casually touch your body is too carel- ack.”

Perhaps she was not used to speaking politely, but she nearly bit her tongue, and then she muttered, “dammit”.

“What a pain, who’d want to be a wife to that woman?”

As Rory grumbled, she tried to stiffly raise her trembling body.

After rejoining the cut surfaces of her severed arm, her bloodstained limbs could move at last. However, she still could not use her strength. The halberd which she would normally swing about like a matchstick needed all her strength just to hold in her hand, to say nothing of raising it.

“Aren’t you glad to meet my mistress, Onee-sama?”

“How many times have I said this already... my god is Emroy, who rules over death, judgement, madness and war!”

“Haa... is this what they call marriage blues? How sad.”

After that, she added a dangerous pronouncement at the end: “As I thought, I’ll need to bring you back by force.”

“What do you mean, wedding blues? What’s sad and not sad? Aren’t you just saying that on your own? And then you go mumbling on and on by yourself over there!”

And then, Rory clung to Itami like a child, with a “I’ve had it” look on her face, almost on the verge of tears.

As the girl in white saw this, she directed a suspicious look at Itami.

When the girl in white spoke to Rory, she was clearly trying to convey her respect, but when it came to Itami, it was plain she viewed and addressed him with scorn.

“Oi, that male human over there, could it be you’re trying to commit adultery with my master’s bride-to-be? If you are, I’ll rip you a new asshole.”

Itami thought, *‘Why me? Adultery?’* He was filled with the desire to deny this ridiculous charge, so he shook his head like a child’s rattle drum. However, Rory was still clinging tightly to him, and she said, “I can’t use my full strength right now, so please buy me some time”. Itami had no objections to that. Under these circumstances, in order to understand the girl in white’s relationship with Rory, Itami felt he needed to communicate with her.

“Question! Question!”

Itami raised his hand, and the girl in white grumbled, “What is it, you’re a pain,” before clicking her tongue and saying, “Fine, fine, hurry up!”

“Well, my first question is, who are... Ah, sorry about that. I am from the JSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force, 3rd Recon Team, and my name is First Lieutenant Itami Youji.”

The girl in white had a pair of large wings on her back. She spread those draconic wings and gently glided down, landing soundlessly before Itami and Rory. After that, she looked him up and down, like she was inspecting a fruit. The way she stared at him felt like she was licking him with her eyes. The girl in white’s slender pupils and actions made Itami think, *She must really be related to reptiles.*

“Enough with the fancy introductions. My name is Giselle, and as you can see I am an Apostle of Hardy.”

The way she bowed and lowered her head reminded Itami of the working girls in Arnus Town’s canteen. Rory quietly told Itami that she was a Demigod of the Dragonkin race, and she was also the youngest apostle in this world.

“Hardy... I mean, so Hardy-sama is a god, then?”

“Of course. Speaking of which, you must be really ignorant not to know that.”

In response to being berated about his cluelessness regarding the Special Region, Itami simply chuckled sheepishly and said, “Ehehe, people often say that about me,” as though he was the fool in a *manzai* act. Then, in order to preserve the current atmosphere, Itami continued asking, “I’ve been thinking since just now — that god Hardy seems to be female, am I correct? And she intends to take Rory, also female, as a wife. What’s that all about?”

“That’s right. What’s so funny? You got a problem with that?”

“No, no, not at all. I was just thinking, from a human point of view, that a woman marrying another woman is new to me. Of course, I’ve heard of this in other countries, but I haven’t actually witnessed it myself, so I just wanted to make sure.”

“Everyone likes different things, gramps. Don’t ask about this again, jii-san.”

“J...Jii-san?”

While Itami was old enough to be called an “uncle”, this was the first time anyone had ever said that right to his face. This simple word was very damaging, and Itami took it straight to the heart. While he was quite hurt, he hid his feelings away and returned to the strong and confident Itami.

“What an open-minded deity she is.”

As Itami finished, Giselle said, “Haaa, what will I do with you?” Then she cricked her neck and shrugged.

“In truth, I don’t even know what my master wants. Although, I don’t think it really matters if my master likes men or women. If you ask me, all you need to do is accept it. Of course, under normal circumstances, who would understand a god’s heart?”

“Not me, for sure. I’m only interested in women.”

“In any case, that’s how it is. Ahhh, what a pain... In any case, it’ll be a long while before my master’s feelings are accepted by more people,” Giselle said as she sighed. Then, she looked to the horizon, where the sun was coming up.

“In other words, these things are a matter of personal preference. Then, Giselle-san, do you like members of the same sex like Hardy-sama? Or do you prefer the opposite sex?”

“Me? I prefer men too.”

“Then, how do you feel about what’s happening now? Ignoring someone’s wishes, dragging someone away by force, and then forcing them to marry a person of the same sex, whom they don’t like. How would you feel if that were you?”

Itami’s words made Giselle furrow her brows. She looked away and clicked her tongue.

“Ahhh, what you said is so annoying. However, bringing back onee-sama is my god’s wish. As an Apostle, I have no choice but to obey. All I can do is what my master says. Don’t you agree?”

“And because of that, you’ve been fighting her until now?”

“Yup. I didn’t expect to meet onee-sama here, so when I saw her we had at it.”

“I’ve always felt Rory was very strong. Did you beat her into this state by yourself?”

Rory’s wounds were grievous. Of course, they would heal, but when he first saw her, she was covered in deep wounds, and her Goth outfit was drenched in blood.

Giselle frowned, “Are you an idiot? Onee-sama took all those wounds for you.”

As Giselle finished, she spat onto the sand.

“No wonder, someone like myself could never have hurt her like that. If I fought the apostle of Emroy, god of war — Rory the Reaper, the most I could manage was a draw. But then how had she ended up like that? Her movements were slow, and she was wounded before we even started fighting... at first I thought she was looking down on me. Later, I realised onee-sama was suffering your injuries on your behalf. After a closer look, I saw that your bodies and hearts were linked,” Giselle said.

Itami was shocked when he heard that, especially after realising he had not been hurt at all. He lowered his head to the silent Rory and asked, “Why did you do that?”

Then, Rory stuck her tongue out at him and shrugged. “Why not? It wasn’t bad or anything.”

Rory’s easygoing tone made Itami feel powerless, and his heart felt like it was being crushed by something.

“Well, we can sort all of that out later. This time, I’m going all out on onee-sama.”

As Giselle finished, she turned to the two Young Dragons behind her. Somehow, they had approached without anyone realising. Giselle stroked their large bodies, and the two Dragons seemed to like it, purring deeply from their throats.

“If I fought one on one, it would be a draw. But with these two guys around, I’m pretty sure I could beat onee-sama.”

Between the two Young Dragons, one was red and one was black. They probably hatched from the eggs in the Flame Dragon’s nest. Their scales and the aura they emitted made one think of the Flame Dragon’s savage form. However, they lacked the fearsome presence of their parents, and their bodies were smaller. That said, they could still be described with the word “huge”, and were disturbing to look at.

“You seem q-uite close to them. Aren’t you worried they’ll get hurt?”

“Ah? I’ve been taking care of these two ever since they were born. I woke the sleeping Flame Dragon, had it mate with a Water Dragon, had it lay its eggs, then when they hatched, I trained them up to this state. It was really tiring, but it was worth it. The combination of the Flame Dragon, Young Dragons and myself are invincible. Just as planned.”

“Th-then why are you starting this fight again?”

“You *are* stupid, aren’t you? My goal is to defeat all the other demigods, including onee-sama. Speaking of which, Rory-nee-sama, how’s your body healing up? It’s about time for round 2, and this time you won’t need to hold back.”

As Giselle made her challenge, she took a stance with her scythe. The two Young Dragons behind her spread their wings, taking an attack posture while keeping their distance.

Rory detached herself from Itami, and levelled her halberd at Giselle. However, the weapon’s weight pulled on her body and made her tremble. Although her body was regenerating, the severe wounds she had taken had had an effect on her.

“Please wait, your Holiness. Was what you said true? Did you wake the Flame Dragon?”

Yao’s question instantly dispersed the gathering tension between both sides.

The way she questioned Giselle while she clutched her wounded left arm with her right hand and limped forward was worthy of respect.

“What? And who might you be?”

“Why! Why did you have to do that!?”

The way Yao shouted those words in anger struck Giselle as quite rude. She replied in a low, dangerous tone.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“Of course! My people and I worship Hardy as our chief god, and we have been faithful followers. Instead, our god rewarded us with the disaster of the Flame Dragon. Why is that?”

Giselle was starting to get a bit annoyed, and she exhaled deeply.

“You shouldn’t question anything my master says. If she says something is black, then regardless of whether it’s white or red or anything, it’s black. As believers, all you need to do is follow and believe. Isn’t that what you’re for?”

“B-but—”

“Hardy-sama has a plan for you.”

“Was leading us to destruction part of that plan?”

“Of course. If your faith was really that strong, it would be even more obvious, don’t you think? You lot should be glad to be able to contribute to Hardy-sama’s plan. Even if you die, die in silence! That’s what faith is, am I wrong?”

As she heard Giselle’s answer “Did you have to ask such an obvious question?” Yao’s entire body shuddered, and she wailed miserably.

“If, if it was just me, I would faithfully obey Hardy-sama’s command. But turning me and my people into sacrifices is far too much. Did Hardy-sama really want us to be eaten by the Flame Dragon?”

Giselle laughed and clapped as she heard Yao speak.

“What’s this? Ah~~ so you were the ones the Flame Dragon was eating. I was wondering where it was getting its food from. So Dark Elves, was it. Well, it must have been unfortunate for you.”

Yao was still agitated just now, but Giselle’s words left her speechless.

The Dark Elves becoming the Flame Dragon’s food — if it was Hardy’s will, that would have been fine, but the truth was that it was not clear. In other words, the response of Hardy to her worshipper’s prayers was blind ignorance.

“Unfortunate? Unfortunate, you say?”

Yao fell to her knees, her hands dangling on the ground.

“I prayed so many times, I cried so many times, I was hurt so many times, I implored Hardy so many times, I begged for help so many times, and I lost hope so many times... but every time I thought of my god, and I cheered myself up, stood myself up, went in search of hope, left my home behind and travelled.... but no matter how many times I prayed, Hardy never answered. She may not even have heard.”

The blood streaming down Yao’s face from her scalp looked like tears of blood. Giselle looked a little lost for words, and she frowned before answering Yao.

“How could the gods listen to every little prayer of all their little worshippers? Things like, ‘I want to get rich’, ‘Save me’, ‘Let me win the top prize’, ‘Grant me a good harvest’, sometimes even ‘Grant me victory’... if Hardy-sama had to listen to and grant each and every little one of your desires, how busy do you think she would be? People who can only beg others for help deserve to become lunch for the Flame Dragon.”

That was the last straw for Yao. The notion that a sincere prayer from the depths of her soul could be compared to a selfish request filled her with explosive rage.

She drew her saber and slashed at Giselle.

However, Giselle’s scythe was faster than Yao, and its curved blade arced down at her.

In the blink of an eye—

As he saw Yao about to be cut by the scythe, Itami charged forward and tackled her to the ground. If Giselle and Rory started to fight, Itami and Yao would be drawn into it.

Fortunately, the scythe merely grazed Yao. Rory took advantage of this opportunity to swing her halberd at Giselle.

Giselle nimbly evaded the blow with a graceful dodge. The Red Dragon decided to step in, and swung its sharp claws at Rory. This time, however, it was Rory's turn to dodge.

Itami hugged Yao to him while drawing his 9mm pistol from its thigh holster and firing three shots in the direction of the Red Dragon. The three rounds hit the Red Dragon pursuing Rory, but they bounced off its tough scales. Though they did not do any harm, those shots managed to check the Red Dragon's advance. Unfortunately, this meant that the Dragons and the Demigod now treated Itami and the others as enemies.

An arc of light flashed out, and then both sides backed away from each other.

Rory raised her halberd again, and Itami helped Yao up and moved to Rory's side. Lelei and Tuka were being marked by the Black Dragon. Just running away had sapped all their strength, and now the two of them had no means of attack. Their stamina had been depleted in the battle against the Flame Dragon and there was no time to recover it.

"Damn..."

He had wanted to avoid getting involved, but instead they were fighting. Itami realised that his pistol was useless against the Dragon, so he pointed it at Giselle instead. As she saw this, Giselle smiled and said, "Oi oi, a mere human male thinks he can challenge me? You have good eyes. I like brash people like you."

"Of course, he's the man who defeated the Flame Dragon, after all," Rory panted, in order to preserve the moral advantage.

"Say what?... Koff, ah, no. Forgive me. Now, I believe just now onee-sama said he defeated..."

"The Flame Dragon. I said, he defeated the Flame Dragon. I mean, he did make it out unscathed, didn't he?" Rory whispered the last part to Itami.

Under Giselle's keen gaze, Itami nearly shouted, "I didn't defeat the Flame Dragon."

All Itami had done was set the plastic explosives. The real fighting had been done by the Dark Elves and Lelei, and the final blow was dealt by Tuka. However, Itami realised that he had to lighten Rory's load, and the way to do that was to make Giselle think he was a worthy foe. He used all of his acting talent to pretend that he was fine.

And then he muttered, "Why am I dealing with stuff like this...?"

The Special Forces Group created fictitious back stories in order to cover up the truth of their members, and he had become the Hero of Nijubashi despite not doing anything fantastic. The legend and the truth about him were very far apart. Who among them could understand the frustration of having to be someone he was not? However, at this moment, he rose to the occasion. With practiced ease — or rather, with long experience from pretending — he projected the image of a veteran warrior.

"I'm not lying. Go look in the volcano's mouth and see, The Flame Dragon's corpse should be there. Oh wait, I destroyed the outcropping where its nest was because it was in the way, so it should probably be buried under tons of rock. Ahahahaha..."

Itami was trembling fit to burst at this point, but he could not show his fear. Rory quietly elbowed him in the side and said "Good job," in a small voice lest someone hear it.

Giselle jerked her chin and the Black Dragon took wing, flying over to investigate the crater.

“Hehe, well, what I do know is that you barely escaped with your life. Even with onee-sama’s protection, what can one mere human do? Anyway, that male human over there. Speak your name again, I forgot it just now.”

“Youji. Itami Youji.”

Rory cut in before Itami could answer. Then, she grabbed Itami’s hand, like she was buying him.

“I’ve already made a contract with Youji. As for you, you might have two Young Dragons, but my partner’s the man who could beat a Flame Dragon.”

“I see... not bad, onee-sama. Not bad at all.”

Just then, the Black Dragon which flew near the volcano cried out. It was a cry of despair because it knew its parent was dead.

“Ara, how exciting! I didn’t expect a fellow like you among the humans. Looks like I didn’t become an apostle for nothing.”

Then, Giselle moved her scythe to an attack position.

“Do you really think you can beat Youji and me with just your two Young Dragons?”

As Rory was exchanging words with Giselle, Itami was fervently praying, “Please God, make her go home, make her think she can’t win and flee, come on, go, get out of here...” However, the person he was praying to leave was right in front of him, and she — Giselle — had already said that “The gods will not listen to every little prayer of their worshippers”.

“Haa~ well, this makes things interesting. Towat! Mout! Don’t hold back on them!”

In response to Giselle’s command, the two Young Dragons took wing, flapping their wings against the backdrop of the freshly-risen sun. Giselle raised her scythe, and Rory raised her halberd.

“Here I come!”

“Dammit! I never asked for this!”

Itami had never intended to fight from the beginning. His plan now was to run up, grab Rory, and run off.

“Yao! Take care of Lelei! Tuka, run!”

As Itami shouted to her, Yao seemed to forget her pain and picked up Lelei. Tuka set off running as though she had been launched from a bow. What had been the prelude to an epic duel had now turned into a great escape. Giselle was completely taken aback by the proceedings and stood still in stunned confusion as she tried to make sense of what was going on.

A cold wind blew across the now-empty slopes of Mt. Tyuba. The freezing gusts seemed to come from the gaps between the rocks, and one could hear what sounded like a crow in the distance.

“Caw...”

How could they have fled so fast? By the time Giselle came to her senses, Itami and the others were already small points in the distance vanishing into the horizon.

“How, how, how... how could this be?”

The Red and Black Dragons looked at Giselle with a “What now?” expression on their faces.

“Quick, get them!”

And so, the two Dragons flapped their wings, rising into the air as they gave chase.

No human being could hope to outrun a flying Dragon’s pursuit, no matter how fast they ran.

They spread their wings wide, rapidly gaining speed and altitude. After that, they prepared to breathe flame from mid-air. But just as they did—

A quartet of vapor trails traced a serpentine path through the air and struck the two Dragons.

“Kurihama, has the target gotten smaller from the last time we saw it?” Kamikoda asked as he launched the Sidewinders (infrared homing air-to-air missiles) he had locked onto the targets.

“There’s two of them, they’re completely different targets!”

“But we can confirm that Lt. Itami’s being pursued by those two life forms.”

Kamikoda nodded his head as he heard Lt. Mizuhara’s voice.

“Military power. Weapons free. Combat maneuvering, go, go, go!”

As Kurihama said so, Kamikoda added, “Get them!”

“Kamikoda you have the red target, Nishimoto will handle the black.”

The proximity triggers for the air-to-air missiles activated, and the Young Dragons were enveloped in explosions. However, if attacks like that could finish them off, this job would not be so difficult. Kamikoda locked onto the Red Dragon in his HUD, and squeezed his trigger.

The M61 Vulcan Gatling-style rotary cannon fired its 20mm ammunition at a rate of 6000 rounds per minute. The storm of lead that headed their way was far beyond hurricane-force, and the Young Dragons spun around like they were in a power mixer.

The two Dragons lost their balance and the ability to stay airborne, and they fell to the ground.

And then, the Dragons proved that their reputations were not for show — though their movements were sluggish, they climbed up again and spread their wings in preparation to take off again. Their fighting ability was excellent. Even though they were youthful Young Dragons, they were still members of the Dragon race, who laid claim to the title of “Rulers of the Sky”.

However—

“Rounds impacting — now!”

The shells from 15 pieces of 155mm SPHs (Self-Propelled Howitzers) — a total of 150 kilos of TNT — burst over the heads of the Dragons. The surrounding land and air — including the Dragons were shaken by thunderous explosions, and the hits kept coming, without a moment’s respite.

“Fire for effect!”

The Dark Elf elders were covering their ears, surprised looks on their faces, as they looked at the flames belching from the muzzles of the Type 75 SPHs. The surroundings were wreathed in smoke, and visibility was close to zero. Amidst the smoke, the loaders got to work.

“What are these people doing?”

“Could it be some sort of ritual?”

They did not realize that these thunderous noises were the sign of an attack being carried out on a target several kilometers distant.

However, the continuous hail of howitzer shells were blowing up the slopes of Mt. Tyuba.

“Ohh, such magnificent power!”

King Duran of the Elbe Kingdom was seated on an observation helicopter, and through his binoculars he watched the distant battlefield, gasping again and again.

The slopes of the mountain were covered in the smoke thrown up by the barrage of shells, and he watched the two Young Dragons being surrounded and pounded by the impact and destruction of the artillery attack.

“When those things came down, I had no idea what was going on. However, it is all clear from a distance. It was a miracle I escaped from that battlefield.”

The noise in the helicopter’s cabin was so great that one had to shout to be heard. So it sounded like Duran was barking angrily at Col. Youga, who was seated next to him.

“That would be Your Majesty’s good fortune,” Youga replied as he nodded.

“Good fortune? Well, it still remains to be seen if being allowed to escape with my life was fortunate. Then, let me see what else you have in store.”

Youga pressed a button on his wireless set and ordered, “All right. Cobra flight, engage!”

And so, the two AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters angled forward and advanced at great speed. The two attack choppers shifted into attack position, and then launched their TOW missiles.



Since they were an older model of wire-guided missiles, they required a human operator to track their targets with an optical sight that would send signals to the missile that would correct their course. In this way, the guided missile would close in unerringly on their target.

These missiles were designed to destroy MBTs. When these arrows fell from the sky and struck home on the Young Dragons, it tore their bodies apart.

The Dragon's scales, famed for their toughness, were shredded with contemptuous ease. Blood and flesh sprayed out all over the surroundings, and under the effects of two or three more anti-tank missiles, the two Dragons were cut to pieces on the chopping block of Mt. Tyuba.

“What, what is this!? Why... is this happening...!?”

Giselle had been caught in the first wave of shell bursts and was half-buried in the surrounding dirt and sand. She dumbly watched as the Young Dragons she had raised by hand were swallowed by explosions. She had been so lost in her battle-lust that she failed to notice anything outside of her field of vision.

As a result, when the distant shells and guided missiles flew over, their destructive power stole her attention. She completely failed to notice where those things had come from, and so she made a mistake —

“Is, is this the power of Itami Youji?”

If Itami were here, he would probably be going “No, no” and trying to correct her misconception. But of course, he was not.

And now that the explosions had ended, she could hear a voice going “Gi~se~lle~? Where are you~?” coming from the direction of the blasts. When Giselle turned, she saw the form of Rory Mercury.

Rory's tattered skirt was blown up by the downdraft of a helicopter, and her hands, caked in dried blood, were holding her halberd as she looked for Giselle.

Several lines dropped down from the helicopters, and the infantrymen fast-roped down. The men who descended slowly approached the Young Dragons, to verify their deaths. However, at this point the two Young Dragons resembled a seafood platter.

With this scene behind her, Rory grinned widely as she stepped forward. Though it was not cold, Giselle broke out in goosebumps as the beautiful terror drew close to her.

“O-onee-sama...”

Her legs were shivering, and her arms were shivering. She flattened herself on the ground to avoid discovery and slowly crawled backwards.

“Crap, if this goes on they'll find me.”

This was what it meant to alternate between offense and defense. Right now, it was her turn to be the prey.

“Gi~se~lle~? Where are you~? I'll lock you up nice and good, so come out~”

Demigods would not age or die, and the flip side of that was that they could not be killed. This was both a blessing and a curse.

Even if her arms were chopped off, even if her legs were severed, even if she was decapitated, Giselle — as a Demigod — would not die. Some Demigods had had their limbs removed and ground to dust, or burned or fed to wild beasts, but their limbs grew back from the stumps.

Therefore, in a battle between Demigods, victory meant removing one's opponent's freedom. The loser would have their limbs amputated, they would be cut in half, perhaps even left as a severed head, or they might be imprisoned in a temple, where they would wait, perhaps hundreds of years, for someone to free them.

Some Demigods had been imprisoned underground for the thousand years it took for them to be freed from the prison of their flesh. It was not difficult to imagine what kind of evil deities these demigods — who had been trapped under the earth for centuries — would become.

Some Demigods had been captured by cruel people, who commanded wild beasts to tear them apart with their jaws and continuously gorge on their regenerating innards. Since they had bodies, they could feel pleasure and, of course, pain. But since they could not die, what awaited defeated Demigods was a fate worse than death.

“Gi~se~lle~? Where are you~?”

Giselle looked over the people following Rory. They were Itami, Lelei, Tuka and Yao. Two humans, and two Elves. Normally, they would be nothing for her. Right now, though, she had no hope of winning. With Itami as her opponent, the man who had finished off the Flame Dragon and who had demonstrated the awesome power that had exterminated the two Young Dragons, there was no way she could hope to win.

Giselle decided to flee. She did not care if her body was dirtied by the ground. Escaping from this place was her number one priority.

Thus ended the Battle of Mt. Tyuba.

The men of the 1st Combat Group streamed onto the ground, and they began verifying the corpses of the two Young Dragons. The two orbiting F-4 Phantoms dipped their wings twice and flew off.

After that, the troopers who had received Itami's report descended into the volcano's mouth and discovered the Flame Dragon's corpse. At last, they could confirm that Tuka had had her revenge.

The JSDF, who were used to disaster relief operations, respectfully recovered the corpses of the Dark Elves from the volcano. In addition, they transported the corpses of the Flame Dragon and the two Young Dragons away, for research purposes. They airlifted the Dragons' corpses underneath their helicopters, which proceeded without a hitch.

Itami and the others leaned against each other as they watched the activity unfold before their eyes.

Tuka and Lelei rested on Itami's shoulders, while Rory was asleep on Itami's knees. As for Yao, her back was to Itami's. She sat in silence. The god she worshipped had betrayed her, and it had been a heavy blow for her.

Both joy and sorrow required energy. In their exhausted state, they had no energy to feel. The only thing they could do was sit there and stare blankly.

“We survived...”

“Yes, we did...”

Tuka's still, small voice was the only thing that answered Itami. She was the least fatigued of all of them because she had been sleeping until before the battle started.

"We did it..."

"Mm. I got my revenge," Tuka replied tersely.

"So don't call me Father again."

Tuka slowly turned to Itami, and replied without hesitation.

"No."

"Why..."

"I'm used to it."

"Really..."

Somehow, Itami felt that nothing mattered any more.

"Suspended for two weeks, docked one month's pay..."

Itami received a document from Maj. Higaki's office the moment he came back, and he drooped his shoulders. Although he'd been prepared to accept any form of punishment, actually receiving the summons to a court-martial was quite depressing.

The other Recon Team leaders hardly looked at Itami, each of them working on the documents they had before them.

"And also, you are relieved from command of 3rd Recon."

Higaki picked up a new folder and pushed it in front of Itami — it was a letter of dismissal.

"Yes..."

"It's only to be expected. No matter the reason, you abandoned your subordinates and went AWOL."

After Higaki finished, Itami could not help but nod.

"That is all for disciplinary action," Higaki said to Itami. And then —

"Attention!"

The footsteps from behind made Itami jerk up straight, and everyone else rose as one.

Lieutenant General Hazama appeared in time with the footsteps. Beside him, a line of JSDF servicewomen followed him, holding black trays brimming with certificates and the like.

"First Lieutenant Itami. For your efforts in liberating the kidnapped Japanese citizen, the Minister of Defense has awarded you the Distinguished Service Medal, 1st Class."

Hazama handed the certificate and the decoration to Itami.

“Next will be the commendations from the Special Region. First, from King Duran of the Elbe Kingdom, to the Japanese government, and then to 1st Lieutenant Itami; a letter of gratitude — *‘Thank you for slaying the Flame Dragon. As such I award you the title of Lord, and from this day on you will be a noble in my Kingdom.’* Next, from the Schwarz Forest, the Council of the Dark Elf tribal leaders has sent a letter of gratitude to the JSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force and to yourself. You have been given the title of an honorary tribal elder among the Dark Elves, and this is for you.”

Hazama handed the raw diamond Yao was hauling around with her to Itami. The diamond was the size of a human head, and it was weighty in his hands. If this were exchanged for cash, it would fetch an almost incalculable price. It might well be equivalent to winning the grand prize for ten lotteries in a row.

“Human trafficking is illegal in Japan, so you’d best take good care of that Yao girl.” After Hazama finished, he handed Yao’s documentation to Itami. Slave trafficking existed in the Special Region, so of course Yao would have a proof of ownership attached to her.

“What’s next? Rube Village of the Dwarfs... here’s a letter of gratitude for you. And another one from a place called Reizobaum. And one from Torte Village. All of them are letters of gratitude thanking you for your heroic deeds in slaying the Flame Dragon. And then...”

A never ending parade of female staff officers handed a plethora of scrolls, documents and the like to Itami from black trays. The final item was a piece of black parchment, which was tied by a black ribbon and sealed with wax. It looked very ominous.

“From the Belnago Shrine? Does such a place exist? Well, never mind...”

The award certificates, the decorations, the raw diamond, as well as a stack of letters — they were almost too much for Itami to carry. Therefore, they had to just jam the black parchment into the rest of the other things.

And then, a final service woman handed a piece of paper to Hazama, “Oh, there’s this. After all the awards and praise you’ve received, if we just punished you, it would look badly on us. Therefore, you have a new assignment. First Lieutenant Itami, I name you a Special Region Resource Investigator.”

“Resource Investigator?”

“Mm. Your job scope will be to run around the Special Region and find us useful resources. Was this not what you always wanted?”

“Well, yes.”

“Once your suspension is lifted, go do your job.”

“Yes, understood, sir!”

Hazama patted Itami on the shoulder, and then he left, along with his train of female officers.

Itami was left alone, carrying a huge pile of things in the center of the room. The others treated him as invisible once more, going back to their work. However, this time, some of them were secretly smiling, while others were glaring jealously at Itami. Both responses made him uncomfortable.

“Ah, sorry about that.”

As though on Itami’s command, jealous voices from all around him shouted, “You bastard!”, followed by a hail of thrown documents.

“Belnago Shrine?”

When Itami asked her that question, Rory smiled thinly.

“That’s a shrine of Hardy.”

Itami was in the co-driver’s seat of Risa’s van, and he raised his eyebrows when he heard Rory’s answer. The scenery of the Kanto region’s outskirts sped past the window, and there were fields and gardens among them. There were few vehicles on this road, and at the junction for agricultural vehicles, a tractor was kicking up dust devils as it drove on.

“Do you want to go?”

The black letter from the shrine was an invitation for Itami.

When Rory asked him, Itami shook his head. The gods of the Special Regions were beings which could not be judged by standard logic. He had no idea what they were up to, so Itami wanted to avoid their schemes as much as possible. However, Rory said that she wanted to go.

“This is an invitation they sent, so we can march right in, bold as we please, into Hardy’s territory, My plan is to say, ‘I don’t want to be your wife’, and then ask her what she’s up to.”

“The Lindel Campus is near Belnago. If you’re going there, so am I.” Lelei said. She had already published her thesis and was applying for a position as a sage.

“Hehe, Kato-sensei allowed Lelei to skip past the savant stage and directly apply to be a sage!” Tuka said cheerfully.

Becoming a sage meant that one was a keeper of great secrets, and it implied that as a wizard, they were ready to become a master in their own right. Although Lelei was probably the youngest ever to apply to be a sage, a magician who could aid in the defeat of a Flame Dragon had no business being a mere apprentice, and so Kato agreed.

“I will personally witness the moment Lelei is acknowledged as a sage!” Tuka’s words reflected everyone’s wishes.

“If I have the chance to go to Belnago Shrine, I plan to inform the Goddess of my will. Therefore, your Holiness Rory, I have a request of you...”

“I know, but is it really all right?”

“Mm, of course.”

“What’s the matter?” Tuka asked, and then Yao smiled and answered.

“I plan to change my name, Yao Ha Ducy, daughter of Dehan, of the Ducy tribe, of the Schwarz Forest, to Yao Ro Ducy.”

“Uwah!” Tuka said, her eyes wide.

“Ah, I don’t quite get it,” Itami said, a confused look on his face. Tuka explained to him.

“Well, for instance, my full name is Tuka Luna Marceau. Luna refers to the god of music, Lunaryur. This means that I venerate Lunaryur as my god.”

“I see... then, what does ‘Ro’ mean?”

“It refers to her Holiness, of course.”

“I don’t think a Demigod has ever had worshippers before.”

“Well, rather than praying to a blind and deaf god, the Demigods not only can hear their believers’ words, but they can respond to them, so they are more worthy of worship.”

Yao thrust her chest out as she said that.

“Then, Rory, when you ascend to divinity, what kind of god will you be?”

Itami already knew the answer to Yao’s question about Rory. This time, it was Rory’s turn to answer.

“Emroy governs Death, Judgement, Madness and War. Her apostles can carry on her portfolio when they ascend, or they can take a portfolio nobody is in charge of, or become the guardian deity of a certain domain.”

“Whoa...”

“Then, what sort of domain will Rory take charge of?”

“Death?”

“War, maybe?”

“Judgement would work.”

“I personally think Madness would suit her style.”

As everyone started with their wild guesses, Rory lowered her head and blushed before quietly giving her answer. Apart from Risa, who had no idea what they were talking about, her answer froze everyone else solid.

“Oi ~ what’s with you guys?”

Risa turned behind to ask what was going on with them, but they all stayed still. Although Risa felt this was all a bit ridiculous, if the driver had frozen up as well, there would have been a traffic accident, so this was actually a blessing in disguise.

Then, the answer which affected everyone so badly was——

“Love... is that so wrong?”

And so...

“We’re here~”

Itami got off the vehicle when he heard Risa’s voice.

They were in a patch of agricultural forest, and a medium-sized hospital building came into view. It looked old from the outside, and it would seem it had only 30 years left in its life. Perhaps if one could endure the age of the building, it might be a relaxing place.

“Itami-dono’s okaa-sama lives here.”

“Youji’s mother?”

“My father’s mother... should be my grandmother, then.”

“...Mother-in-law...”

Itami could not find it in himself to take a step forward. Now, Tuka pushed him.

“Go see her.”

Now, Tuka had forgiven Itami for pretending to be her father, and also for dragging her to go exterminate the Flame Dragon, but the condition was to “go see your mother.”

Of course, Itami had pretended to be Tuka’s father for her sake. Still, he felt guilty about that, and it was messing up their relationship. Therefore, Tuka used the excuse of “My conditions and your punishments are two separate things”. She gave her own punishment to Itami, because she felt that was the only way they could remove the gap between them.

Itami was also aware of what she was thinking. However, the thought of meeting with his mother made him uneasy.

“I got it, I got it...”

Itami took a deep breath as he said that. However, his cowardly attitude toward this annoyed the impatient Risa, to say nothing of Tuka, Lelei and Rory. The latter three each kicked Itami in the butt, with a “Just go already!” look on their faces.

Afterword

Firstly, thank you very much, to all my readers -- whether you have finished “Gate: Thus The JSDF Fought Here Vol. 2 Flame Dragon Arc (second part)”, or if you are just about to begin. In any case, this afterword will pertain to the events in this book.

What did you think of the Flame Dragon Arc? In truth, this was the part of the work that I most wanted to write.

I wanted to envision a clash in a fantasy world, of “Dragons”, the strongest creatures, against modern weaponry. I would fill it with my imagination and fantasy. Mm, it turned out as I hoped..

Of course, when fighting a giant creature or a tank, and when war machines do battle, the one defining feature of these conflicts is that you need to use big weapons to smash them to bits. That is a rule for military operations, but events like that won’t show how the protagonist struggles for his victory. I believe movies like Godzilla adequately show how organizations do battle against monsters.

Therefore, I created a scenario where Itami used his personal abilities and the help of his friends to face off against the Flame Dragon.

To me, since one is doing battle with a Flame Dragon, then the smaller the weapon, the better.

Therefore, the “Rod of Steel” made its appearance, the 110mm anti-tank rocket launcher.

In this light novel series, all sorts of weapons used by the JSDF have made their appearance, but because “It’s okay to throw them away in times of emergency”, I have only showcased the older weapons in this series. Some of them are even museum pieces that aren’t even in use any more. Some of my readers with professional knowledge gave me a lot of useful advice, and although the LAM is a newer weapon, I wrote it into the story. The reason is because the JGSDF treats it as a one-shot weapon -- it is discarded after use.

The LAM as described in the text is an incredibly powerful man-portable weapon, being able to penetrate 70cm of steel plate. The superbattleship Yamato had 41cm of belt armor, and the thickest armor plating on it was 85cm thick, so you can see the weapon’s power from there.

The Flame Dragon in the work was written as a “flying tank” or “flying battleship”, yet the LAM had the power to kill it.

I imagined a scene where I could shoulder-carry a LAM, and fire a rocket at a Flame Dragon. The idea “Awesome, now I can become a Dragon Slayer in a fantasy world” refused to leave my head.

Being able to use modern weapons in the game “Monster Hunter” would be great, wouldn’t it?

Yanai Takumi